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XCOM: FULLY DECLASSIFIED

JULIAN GOLLOP RETURNS TO HIS HIGH-STAKES STRATEGY SERIES

8Bitdo GAMEPAD OFFER

SEE PAGE 32

PLUS

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VINCENT BAILLET
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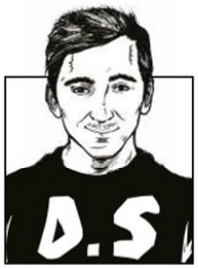
THE RETROBATES

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE GAME BOY GAME?

DARRAN JONES

Revenge Of The Gator is a charming pinball game that I still play on my Super Game Boy.
Expertise:
Planning expensive birding trips to Scotland
Currently playing:
Dragon Force
Favourite game of all time:
Strider



DREW SLEEP

My parents took me along to see Jools Holland once, but I didn't actually see anything because I was too busy hunched over on the ground playing *Super Mario Land 2*.
Expertise:
Leaving the team high and dry on deadline day
Currently playing:
Final Fantasy IX
Favourite game of all time:
Final Fantasy VIII

NICK THORPE

You would expect me to say *Tetris*, but it's actually *Pokémon Blue*, which I received for my 13th birthday.
Expertise:
Owning five Master Systems (I sold two)
Currently playing:
Donkey Kong
Favourite game of all time:
Sonic The Hedgehog

WOZ BROWN

R-Type was one of my first games; I was gobsmacked that it ran on a handheld.
Expertise:
Hooking up every Nintendo home system to one a single HDMI input
Currently playing:
Super Smash Bros Wii U
Favourite game of all time:
The Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time

IAN LEE

Here's something pretty awful, I honestly don't think I've ever played the original Game Boy. I am so sorry and hang my head in shame.
Expertise:
Buying overpriced stuff on eBay then never touching it
Currently playing:
Antstream
Favourite game of all time:
Elite (BBC Model B)

DAVID CROOKES

I'm going to have to say *Tetris*. I played it to the point of developing 'Tetris Syndrome', which meant I really could enjoy the game everywhere I went!
Expertise:
Amstrad, Lynx, adventures, Dizzy, and PlayStation (but is it retro? Debate!)
Currently playing:
Football Glory
Favourite game of all time:
Broken Sword

PAUL DRURY

Pokémon Red without a doubt. I spent 102 hours totally filling up my Pokédex and have fond memories of every minute.
Expertise:
Train games
Currently playing:
Donkey Kong 2: Jumpman Returns
Favourite game of all time:
Sheep in Space

ANDREW FISHER

Link's Awakening, a huge quest packed into a tiny cartridge.
Expertise:
Over 35 years of gaming, from Commodore 64 to Wii U
Currently playing:
Splatoon
Favourite game of all time:
Paradroid

RORY MILNE

I'll go for *Monster Max*. It's not as colourful as *Batman* or *Head Over Heels*, but its gameplay is less linear and it's full of fresh mechanics.
Expertise:
The game that I'm writing about at the time of writing
Currently playing:
Super Robin Hood
Favourite game of all time:
Tempest

LOADING...

I've never been very good at predicting things. I backed HD DVD over Blu-ray, could never tell when a song I heard on the radio would become a breakout hit and purchased an Atari Lynx over the Game Boy. To me, Atari's console seemed like the clear winner because it had a colour screen and a large number of great arcade conversions. Nintendo's system seemed silly to me on release, and for the first six months of its release I was blissfully ignorant of it.

Looking back, it's easy to see how an excellent battery life, a reliance on existing 8-bit architecture and some truly phenomenal software allowed the Game Boy to become the success it became. I couldn't see that at all when it first arrived on the scene, though.

Fortunately, it only took a handful of visits to a friend's house and multiple games on *Contra*, *Tetris*, *Double Dragon* and *Link's Awakening* to realise that I had indeed backed the wrong horse and I eventually picked up a Game Boy of my own, and I have owned one ever since. It's a real pleasure, then, to feature such a cultural phenomenon on the front cover and to talk to the many people then did a far better job of realising the Game Boy's early success than I did.

Enjoy the magazine!

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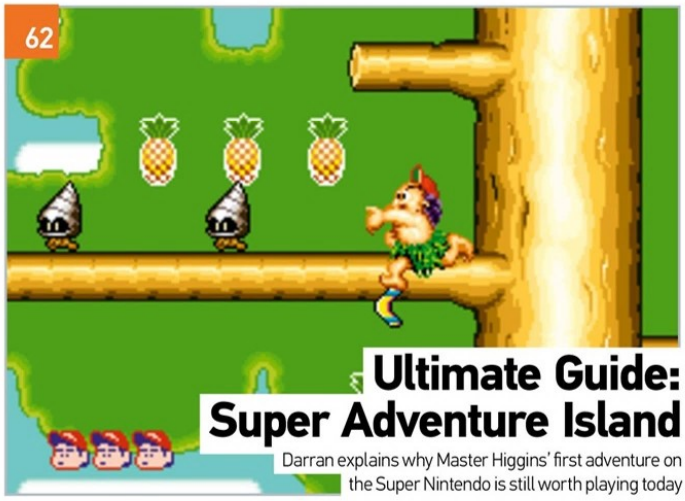

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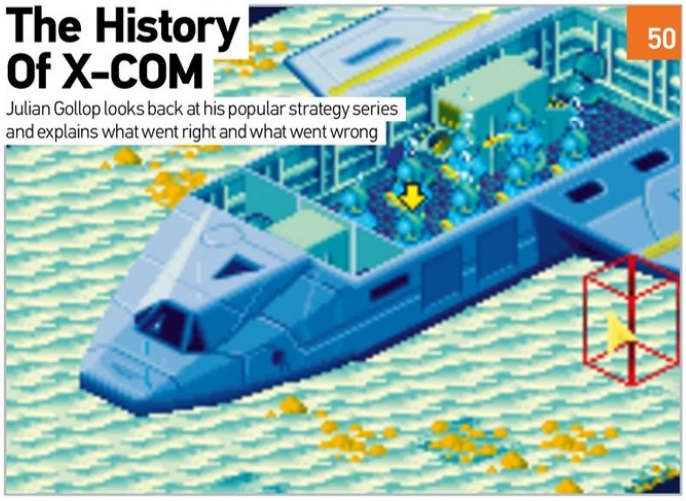

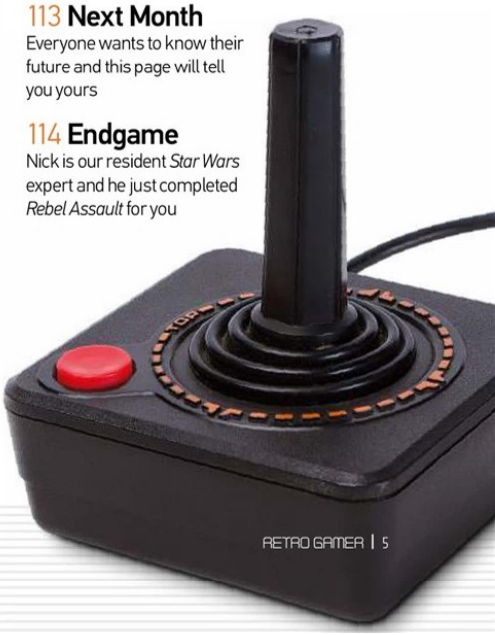

Photos: Jason Moon

MICRO MUSIC, MAESTRO!

The 8-Bit Symphony raised the roof of Hull's City Hall

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Our resident columnist discusses the sheer appeal of the Game Boy

Over 800 retro gaming music fans made their way to the very grand City Hall in Hull on Saturday 15 June, and even a heavy summer shower as they queued did not dampen their enthusiasm. A VIP reception was held earlier in the afternoon at Hull College – which helped stage the event, thanks to the efforts of CEO Michelle Swithenbank – as drinks and canapes were enjoyed by gaming legends and invited followers alike. A selection of classical SID tunes helped set the tone before the 75-strong Hull Philharmonic Orchestra took the stage, under the direction of conductor Robin Tait. C64 Audio's Chris Abbott and Graham Raddings acted as hosts, introducing each tune with background notes and jokes, plus a pirate flag. 8-Bit Symphony has long been Chris' vision, and it finally came to fruition in unforgettable style.

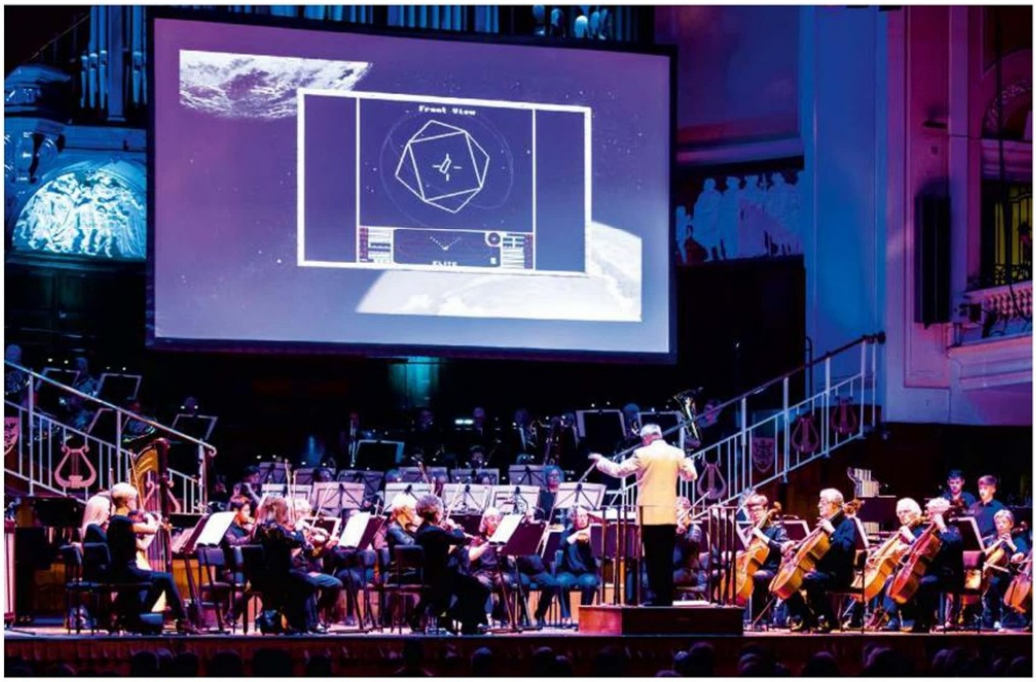
» Hull's City Hall proved to be the perfect venue for Chris Abbott's impressive 8-bit tribute.

Adding to the atmosphere were the videos projected on a screen above the orchestra. More than just raw game footage, these themed videos (from creators including Toni Galvez, Mat Ricardo, Andrew Wright and Ian Flory) showed humour and respect for the subject matter that was being celebrated at the event. A special mention must go to Steph Abbott for her illustrations of each piece, shown on the projector and in the glossy concert programme. This was available as a signed edition (by Rob Hubbard and Paul Norman), with the profits being donated to Special Effect – the UK charity that help makes gaming accessible to all. A Blu-ray giving the 'home concert' experience (with the videos playing alongside sequenced versions of the music) was also on sale, and was streamed online as the concert was happening.

The concert loaded up with a medley of *Ocean Loader* tunes and *Comic Bakery* from Martin Galway, accompanied by famous loading screens. Allister Brimble's *Green Beret* arrangement and Rob Hubbard's *Kentilla* (originally intended for orchestra) stood out, plus the bouncy William Wobbler and Mark Cooksey's *Ghosts 'N Goblins*. The first half ended with Rob's *Flash Gordon*, while the interval had its own assortment of SID ragtime pieces. The second half started with *International Karate*, and included a tribute to Ben Daglish, Glyn R Brown's epic interpretation of *Firelord* and Paul Norman's *Aztec Challenge* (which was arranged by Peter Connelly).

As the concert drew to a close, Jon Hare spoke in memory of his late colleague Richard Joseph, followed by Richard's comic title tune from *Stifflip & Co.* With the credits scrolling to the sound of *Barbillax* (Richard's *Barbarian II* merged with Martin Galway's *Parallax* high-score tune), fans queued up at the signing table to meet Rob Hubbard and Paul Norman in person.

"It was a very special event for me and everyone who attended," reflects Rob Hubbard. "I don't think we could ever top it, but another concert somewhere would be very



» Ben Daglish's space epic *Trap*, accompanied by footage of classic space game *Elite*.

cool!" As musical producer, Rob was heavily involved. "Composing and orchestrating are what I love doing – more than actually playing an instrument, or playing live." As for highlights, Rob says, "There were quite a few. Meeting Ben's wife and family again, and the tribute video with The *Last Ninja* was very moving. *WAR, Monty's Journey* (Rob's 19th-Century romantic arrangement of the *Monty On The Run* and Commando high score tunes), and *Aztec Challenge* were very well played."

Chris Abbott was very happy with the evening. "Obviously it's live so there will be the occasional glitch, but the orchestra played beautifully and with passion, the audience were wonderful and everyone was at the top of their game," he says. "Having Rob Hubbard and Paul Norman in attendance to hear their stuff was amazing. I think most people would think that the segment paying tribute to Ben Daglish and ending with 'Jedi Ben' illustrated by my daughter Steph, and the one paying tribute to Richard Joseph (Stifflip and Co, with a funny Queen Victoria intro by my good friend Anna Black) were particular highlights. Otherwise, people's favourite tracks varied wildly: which is always a good sign."

» Conductor Robin Tait takes a well deserved bow. The orchestra was on top form all night.

There was a tinge of sadness for Chris with the absence of Ben Daglish. "I miss Ben: he would have rocked the joint and conducted the heck out of *Trap*. As it was, me and Graham (Raddings) were kind of hosting it as almost 'part of the audience'. We're the target audience for these things. I will say that I was really pleased that all age ranges were present, it was enjoyed by children and elderly fans of Hull Philharmonic alike."

> **"The orchestra played beautifully and with passion, the audience were wonderful"**
>
> Chris Abbott

» (Left to right) Rob Hubbard, Paul Norman and Chris Abbott.

The planned CD box-set of orchestral music and the printed scores – now also called *8-Bit Symphony*, and previewed at www.c64audio.com – are progressing well. Chris says, "The concert really allowed us to attract the extra talent (Rob Hubbard, arranger Ally Pickering, conductor Robin Tait) to get that project finished before the end of the year, so that we are putting out unquestionably world-class orchestral arrangements." As for more concerts, Chris adds "If people buy the box-set they can certainly get an idea of what's likely to make it onto the bill for 8-Bit Symphony 2: more Follin, more Hubbard, a tad more Daglish, and some more iconic tracks. We have got to build up momentum for the next one." Everyone who experienced the amazing atmosphere will certainly look forward to another concert. *

Thanks to Jason Moon and Chris Abbott for the official photos.

SYMPHONIC CLASSICS

A selection of highlights from the show

LAST NINJA WASTELANDS

Lee Bolton of Zoetrope Films made a touching tribute video for the late Ben Daglish, who passed away last year, shown during this medley of two of Ben's tracks from the System 3 isometric action classic. The recorder solo from Margaret Pearson brought back memories of Ben's virtuosity with multiple instruments.

FORBIDDEN FOREST AND BEYOND

Paul Norman's musical background gave his *Forbidden Forest* games a strong atmosphere. Hearing them reworked for orchestra was spine-chilling, alongside the video of gory pixellated deaths from several 8-bit horror games, in an arrangement by *Tomb Raider* composer Peter Connelly that recalls many a Danny Elfman soundtrack.

MONTY ON THE RUN

There was a standing ovation for retro music maestro Rob Hubbard before this penultimate tune from the classic Commodore 64 platformer, and another afterwards for the amazing orchestra that delivered his tunes in an awe-inspiring new way. Building from a horn solo, the dynamic and changing track was a real workout for the strings and conductor Robin Tait (who called it the toughest piece in the 8-Bit Symphony programme).

NINTEN-WOAH!

Nintendo's Direct was easily the highlight of E3 2019. The stream itself is worth checking out as it featured a hoard of retro-flavoured news, including a glimpse at a *Panzer Dragoon* remake. Square used the show to highlight a remake of *Trials Of Mana* and that the *Mana Collection* was finally heading to the west. Other highlights included more news on *Luigi's Mansion 3*, *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, and it was all capped off with a sneak peek of *Breath Of The Wild 2*. Phew!

BATTLETOADS RETURN

Although it was first announced at last year's E3, we've finally had our first look of Dlala Studios' *Battletoads* game. It seems very much in the style of earlier games in the series, so there's, of course, a focus on brawling. The new 2.5D visuals look extremely impressive, and breathe fresh personality into the three toads, while Microsoft is doubling down on the multiplayer aspect of the game, touting couch co-op as one of its key appeals. Needless to say, you can expect a review when the game debuts later this year.

SMALL WONDER

KONAMI ANNOUNCES PC ENGINE MINI AT E3

This year's E3 has been rather wonderful from a retro perspective, but the most exciting thing for us was easily Konami's surprise reveal of the PC Engine Mini. Admittedly, very little about the device has been announced so far, but even the few nuggets of information that have dropped have left us drooling for more.

Three versions of the device are going to be available. The PC Engine variant (the best looking one) will be dropping in Japan, US gamers will be treated to the TurboGrafx-16 version, while European audiences will receive the PC Engine CoreGrafx, which is based on the later Japanese system which featured AV over RF. Interestingly, all three consoles appear to be the same size as the originals (hardly surprising when you consider how small the original PC Engine was), meaning they're not strictly 'mini' in the same way other similar consoles are.

Still, we're not going to get strung up on size, we're largely interested in the emulation and the games and that's where things are a little unclear at this moment in time. Konami so far hasn't announced which developer is on emulator duties, something that can make or break these systems. The hope is that M2 (which has recently been working on Konami's *Contra* and *Castlevania* compilations) is in the driving seat, but the studio is also hard at work on the Mega Drive Mini, which might make it unlikely. We know there are various display modes and quick save support, but that's about it.

» [PC Engine] Despite Konami saying otherwise, we're convinced *Rondo Of Blood* will feature outside Japan.

» [PC Engine] It's not been announced yet, but we'll be amazed if *Gunhed* isn't included.

While only a handful of games have been announced so far, it's a solid roster of games that consists of *R-Type*, *Ninja Spirit*, *Ys I & II*, *Dungeon Explorer*, *Alien Crush* and *New Adventure Island*. *Rondo Of Blood* has also been announced as a Japanese exclusive, but we expect this to change as the machine gets nearer to release. The available games are a mixture of third-party classics and also CD-ROM releases, suggesting that Konami is putting a lot of thought into the game selection. While no *Bomberman* game has been revealed, the multitap device that will be available suggests it's only a matter of time before it will be. We're expecting hits like *Bonk* to make the cut as well.

NEC's PC Engine was an incredibly exotic delight that still retains an air of mystery about it today, so it's pleasing to see Konami ensuring the classic system reaches as many gamers as possible. More news as we get it. *

> **"Konami so far hasn't announced which developer is on emulator duties"**

KONAMI

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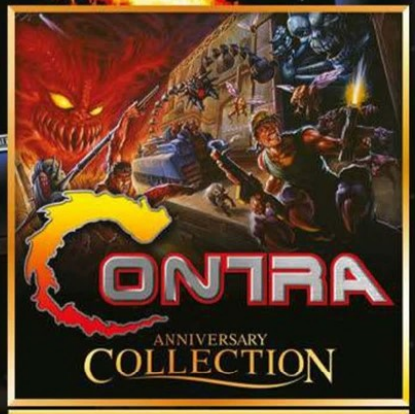
OUT NOW



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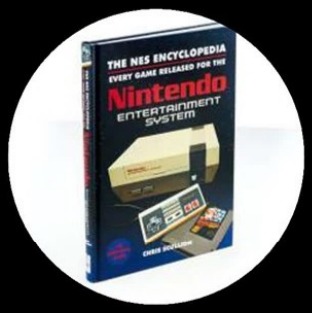
50th Anniversary KONAMI

The SNES Omnibus Volume 2

The first book to chronicle Nintendo games this month is courtesy of Brett Weiss and concludes his whistle stop tour of the SNES, which began with *Volume 1*. Unlike similar books we've seen in the past, it only focuses on games released in the US, meaning a few of our personal favourites don't make the cut and you're only getting half the story here (it covers N-Z). It does feel a little minimalist in its layout, but many of the entries do include various insights from games journalists and developers, which adds value. It does feel a little expensive next to the other books we've featured this month, though.

Price: £47.99
From: amazon.co.uk



The NES Encyclopedia: Every Game Released For The Nintendo Entertainment System

While Chris Scullion's first book lacks the production values of Sam Dyer's compendiums, it is still an enjoyable read about one of the best-loved consoles of the Eighties. It's lacking in interviews, but that's somewhat understandable when you consider that all 714 officially licensed games have been included.

Price: £20.54
From: amazon.co.uk

ZX-VGA-JOY

Running classic systems on new TVs is difficult, which is where devices like the ZX-VGA-JOY come in. This device plugs straight in to your Spectrum's expansion port and connects to the VGA port of your monitor. It outputs 640x480 at 60Hz, 75Hz and 85Hz and 800x600 at 60Hz. You will need to supply your own monitor cable, but as an added bonus it also features a Kempston joystick port.

Price: 49.99 Euros
From: sintech-shop.de

Mortal Kombat gear

If you're still enjoying the recently released *Mortal Kombat 11*, why not enhance your gaming experience with Numskull's selection of official gear? We suggest taking a victory sip from your official heat changing mug whenever you pull off a fatality. Then you can sit back and enjoy the immersive aroma of blood, sweat and tears from your 40-hour burning candle.

Price: £12.99 (candle), £7.99 (mug)
From: numskull.com

Sega Master System: A Visual Compendium

There are two rabid Master System fans in the office, and neither of them were disappointed when Sam Dyer's latest book turned up. As you'd expect from a Bitmap Books production, this is a ridiculously lavish tome, with gorgeous looking photography, beautiful pixel art and a surprising amount of insight into many of the games (even if some of the entries do leave you wanting more info).

One particular cool touch that helps make Sam's sixth book in his series stand out from the others is that 22 pages require the use of stereoscopic glasses, mimicking the effect of the console's 3D Glasses. It's typical of what you'd expect from Sam and the end result is another essential addition to your library.

Price: £24.99 (softcover) £29.99 (hardback) **From:** bitmapbooks.co.uk

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LOVE LETTER TO THE EIGHTIES

Tobias Bjarneby on blending genres and pixel art in 198X

If you've been following its Kickstarter campaign since its reveal in May 2018, you'll already be well aware of Hi-Bit Studios' brand-new game. Designed as a love letter to the Eighties and the pleasure of visiting your local arcade, *198X* is an interesting-looking project which features a variety of different genres (including shoot-'em-up, racing and scrolling fighter) some truly beautiful pixel art and a rather stylish soundtrack from legendary games composer Yuzo Koshiro. With a release imminent, we felt it was the perfect time to sit down with Hi-Bit Studios' Tobias Bjarneby to find out a little more about his ambitious nod to classic gaming.

Where did the overall concept for *198X* originate?

Before all this, I'd been working as a videogame journalist and editor for 25 years, producing hundreds of magazines and several books. The core of our development team also founded Stockholm Museum Of Video Games in 2016, so you could say that *198X* is an extension of our previous work with regards to preserving and celebrating videogame history.

What challenges are presented through creating five distinctly different games?

The big challenge was defining the essence of these games and their distinct era. Why do I love *Out Run* so dearly when I couldn't care less about modern racing games? How come the opening stage in *Final Fight*, the first deadly slash in *Strider* and the initial boss encounter in *R-Type* had such a huge impact on me?

We found the answers not merely in graphics, sounds and core mechanics, but in the context, presentation and gameplay variation. Visiting an arcade in the Eighties was all about finding new experiences, swiftly moving from one world to another. Driving your Ferrari under the blue sky, then cleaning up the streets of Metro City, or suddenly soaring over the rooftops of 2048 Moscow and flying further out to space to face Dobkeratops.

This is what *198X* is all about. We are not making just another ninja game or beat-'em-up game – we are using these games to tell a bigger story.

» Can you guess which classic Eighties racer this section of *198X* is based on?

» Tobias Bjarneby was a successful Swedish games journalist in the Nineties.

So how big are these games?

In part one, releasing now, there are five full-blown stages, one for each arcade game. These stages are bigger and more varied compared to any single stage in the Eighties games we draw inspiration from. I'd say the game we're releasing now is the same size as any *Final Fight* or *R-Type* or *Strider* – the typical late Eighties arcade game, with more storytelling and less frustration!

Have you drawn inspiration from any other games?

There are so many! Each game in *198X* is full of references to the history of that

» *198X* is now being spread across two parts. The first part should be available now.

» The pixel artwork in *198X* is exquisite and has been created by a variety of different artists.

» Shadowplay takes influences from a host of Eighties ninja releases, including *Shinobi*, *Ninja Gaiden* and the excellent *Strider*.

specific genre. Take Shadowplay – our ninja game – as an example: you can find *Shinobi*, *Strider*, *Ninja Gaiden* and *Ninja Spirit* in there, but we are also mixing these influences with the bigger, overarching story we're trying to tell.

Has it been difficult creating *198X*'s distinctive pixel art?

It's been extremely time-consuming. Most modern 'neo-retro' games use a much more zoomed-out camera with smaller sprites and more open level design. And while I understand and respect that choice, we really wanted to have spectacular visuals with huge sprites in our games. The late Eighties were all about who could project the biggest sprites on the most detailed backdrops – while the catchiest chiptunes were playing – and we just love that!

So how did the collaboration with Yuzo Koshiro for *198X*'s soundtrack come about?

His music was performed by the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra a few years back, and I know the producer of that concert. So when we were looking for composers for our arcade games, I just thought we should give it a shot. So we asked [him], and he said yes! I believe that Yuzo Koshiro really shaped the sound of this era of gaming, so it's been a huge honour to have him on board for *198X*. We were also fortunate enough to guide him through our hometown of Stockholm late last year, cementing our deep appreciation and love for this humble musical legend.

» There's a lovely *Final Fight*/*Streets Of Rage* vibe to the fighting stages of *198X*, which makes us very happy indeed.

Is it hard to manage backers' expectations on Kickstarter?

Our amazing backers have been very supportive. When we told them we needed to split the game in two parts, to be able to deliver on the promise we made to them and to ourselves, they were very encouraging. They really understand what we want to achieve and how much it takes to get there. We might be a pretty small studio in terms of people, but our ambitions are indeed huge! And we are so excited to finally be able to invite all of you to experience *198X*.

> **"The late Eighties were all about who could project the biggest sprites on the most detailed backdrops"**
>
> Tobias Bjarneby

Why do you think that is there much nostalgia out there for arcade games?

Arcades used to be these magical places. There you'd find the coolest and most impressive videogames, with futuristic qualities far beyond what you could play at home. These towering machines were more than just games – they were portals to other worlds. To me, this is the perfect setting for a Eighties coming-of-age story. Of course, *198X* is hardly the first game to be heavily influenced by Eighties arcade games – but what we're doing is to put those games into context, capturing the atmosphere surrounding them. We tell a story about discovering an arcade and finding new worlds in its games. *198X* is a videogame about falling in love with videogames. ★

Who is Iain Lee?
Iain Lee is a freelance broadcaster who loves gaming, particularly retro gaming. He currently hosts *The Late Night Alternative* show at weekends from 10pm on www.talkradio.co.uk and runs daily retro streams on www.twitch.tv/iainlee.

Back in the groove

Ten years ago, I was getting ready to have my first kid. The games room, where I kept my mighty retro collection, was going to be the nursery. I had kind of lost interest in retro stuff, I hardly went in there, so I thought I'd do a *grown up thing*. I decided to get rid of everything. The PlayStation 2 test unit, the Dreamcast, the modded BBC Micro, the Neo-Geo handheld, everything.

I couldn't face going through everything and putting them individually on eBay, so I did something altruistic. I listed them on Freecycle and offered them to whomsoever wanted them and could take them all in one bundle.*

A few days later, a nice chap came and took the lot. I felt a twinge, a tingle, as though maybe that wasn't the right thing to do, but I shook it off and focused on being a dad.

Ten years later, I'm divorced, and spending all my money buying back everything I handed over to a stranger that day. What a stupid, dumb, ridiculous idea it had been. Give it all away? What the hell was I thinking? That was *insane*! Box it up, put it in storage, hide it under the bed, lend it to mates. *But give it all away*? No!

What got me back into a retro gaming jag was taking my boys (two of them now, seven and nine) to a retro gaming market in London. I thought they needed to see something more than just *Fortnite* and bloody *Lego Star Wars*. I wasn't really sure how they'd take it. I was worried they would find the whole thing painfully dull and hate me for making them sit for an hour and a half in the car to get there. But I needn't have worried. They absolutely loved it! They wandered around wide-eyed asking what each machine was and for a couple of hours we were closer than we'd been in a while. I shared stories of my first PlayStation, about spending ages loading up Spectrum games, and why you should always treat your joystick with respect as you don't want to snap it.

I gave them a few quid each and they chose, completely independently, a GBA and a PS2. They played them for a few weeks and then drifted back to *Fortnite*. But I was hooked. I had that river of electricity run down the back of my neck, that little frisson of excitement. I'd fallen back down the rabbit hole, and it was delicious. I didn't buy anything myself that day, but as soon as I got home, I started looking up Dreamcasts online.

I'm back in the retro groove. And thrilled to be sharing my thoughts with you every month in the magnificent **Retro Gamer** magazine. ★

*I kept hold of one. A boxed, mint condition Nomad that had been gifted to me after I finished filming *Thumb Bandits*, a video games documentary from about 2001. I'm so glad I kept that as I just looked at how much they go for now. My word! I'm rich!

Do you agree with Iain's thoughts? Contact us at:
RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag darran.jones@futurenet.com

SongBird Symphony

The cutest musical platformer ever composed
is coming to Nintendo Switch, PlayStation® 4 and Steam on 25th July!

Chirp in rhythm to activate platforms

Find collectibles hidden in the forest

Engage in challenging music battles

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Who is Paul Rose?
Paul is probably better known as Mr Biffo – the creator of legendary teletext games magazine Digitiser. These days, he mostly writes his videogame ramblings over at Digitiser2000.com. If you want more Biffo in your eyes, you can catch him as the host of *Digitizer The Show* at www.bit.ly/biffo2000.

Boy wonder

To pick up a Game Boy in 2019, it feels like a bulky antique. Far more even than certain games systems which came before it, the Game Boy feels like a relic. That monochrome screen, the heft of it, the lack of any concession to ergonomics… yet somehow, the Game Boy conquered the world, its deceptive accessibility proving to be as appealing to First Ladies as they were to my mother.

That for me is the real achievement of the Game Boy; it was the first – and to date only – games console that my mother ever owned. I'm not even sure whether she had any games other than *Tetris*. She even got quite good at it, as I remember.

Prior to this, videogames were something my mum saw as for her son. She didn't try to understand them (though I remember her having a go at *Space Invaders* on the Atari 2600, and doing that thing where she weaved from side-to-side along with the on-screen movement). Even after the Game Boy she showed no interest in games, beyond *Candy Crush* on Facebook.

She and my dad had a go at *Wii Sports* one Christmas – which inevitably led to a festive row when she accused him of cheating at bowling – but beyond that… nothing. No interest whatsoever in playing games. She, like many of her generation, finds technology confusing. She can just about deal with her iPad, but if it does anything unpredictable, I'll get a call to go down and 'fix it' for her.

Usually, it's something as simple as she's closed one of her browser tabs, or accidentally signed up for a new Facebook account, and she can't work out where all her friends have gone – no, I don't know how she did that one, either. My dad is even worse. Most of his technical issues – such as the time his Kindle stopped working, and he bought a new one – can be solved with the classic, 'Have you tried turning it off and on again?'

My dad, though, never got into games. He was interested in my ZX Spectrum – albeit from a programming perspective. I bought him some military strategy game for his PC one year, but I don't think he even tried to play it (he's got a weird paranoia about installing anything on his computers, in case it gets 'full up'…).

My mum, however, was – for a couple of years – a gamer, of sorts. Something specific and difficult to identify drew her to the Game Boy. It could be the simplicity of it. There was nothing to download. No difficult controls; just two buttons and a d-pad, plus start and select. It ran on batteries, so there was none of that mysterious, and seemingly supernatural, recharging. Batteries she understood. Even the green-and-black graphics would've been familiar from a life which had seen more black-and-white TV screens than colour ones. The Game Boy was simple, it was accessible, it was a machine for everyone. *

> "Something specific and difficult to identify drew her to the Game Boy"

Do you agree with Paul's thoughts? Contact us at:
RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag darran.jones@futurenet.com

Zzap!–back

Chris Wilkins, founder of Fusion Books on the new Zzap!64 annual

One of the best things about last Christmas was the release of the *Zzap!64 Annual 2019*, which featured a whole host of classic writers and was overseen by Roger Kean and Oliver Frey. It proved such a success that Chris and the team at Fusion Books are back again with a follow-up that should be ready to arrive under your tree in time for the big day.

So Chris, what can readers expect from this year's annual?
More of the same with a little tweak here and there. The response we had from the first annual was that it totally captured the feel of the *Zzap*'s of old – the only niggle was the reviewers' portraits where the likes of Jaz [Rignall] and Robin [Hogg] gave a 'thumbs up' even if the game was average or poor. This has now been fixed for this year's annual.

Which writers can we expect to see this time around?
We have called upon the same reviewers from last year's annual for consistency and their expertise – so Mat Allan, Paul Robinson, Jaz Rignall and Robin Hogg. We also have Andrew Fisher joining the review team this time also. Other writers include Martyn Carroll, Simon Butler from Ocean Software, and Stuart Williams will once look after the adventure section.

Will Roger Kean and Oli Frey still be involved with the annual this year?
Yes – Oli Frey will be producing a brand-new cover for the annual, so he'll be dusting off his airbrush once again and creating the cover old school. He will also be adding his unique graphical touches throughout the annual, as he is very famously known for. Roger Kean is taking the helm once again as the editor and will also be laying out the whole annual, thus making sure for the reader it is *Zzap!64* through and through.

How many new reviews are you hoping to feature this year?
We are aiming for around the 30 mark which is consistent with the number of reviews in each issue during *ZZap!64*'s heyday of the Eighties. It's amazing to think that so many great games are still appearing on the Commodore 64 allowing us to produce another review jam-packed issue for this year.

» *ZZap!64 Annual 2020* will be instantly familiar to any retro gaming child of the Eighties.

What challenges do you face putting these books out each year?
The main challenge is time. Those contributing to the books have day jobs, or are retired. We take a two-to-four-month duration to produce each annual – Newsfield were creating issues of *Crash*, *Zzap!* and *Amtix* on a monthly basis and Oli, for example, had to produce covers for each month. Roger tells me it was a crazy time.

What's the best way for readers to buy the annual if they missed the Kickstarter campaign?
After the Kickstarter finishes we use CrowdOx to collect backer details. It allows us to create a 'shop' offering many of the perks that were on the Kickstarter, as well as the annual itself. This year we linked zzap64annual.com to the CrowdOx page – so readers can enter that URL to get to the shop.

So be honest. How far away are we from an *Amtix Annual*?
Amtix is a slow burner – we have every intention to do an Amtix Annual to complete the set. It's just finding the time to produce it, though I can say there are writers putting together features for us. So let's see how it goes. Roger would very much like to do a *Fear* annual next with John Gilbert – so that may take priority! ★

» A number of classic 8-bit developers, including Archer MacLean, regularly help Chris out with his projects.

» Kickstarter projects often have cool little pledge bonuses, and Chris' latest book is no different.

BACK TO THE NOUGHTIES

AUGUST 2002 – The GameCube has barely been out five minutes, and people are already predicting that it'll be the last ever Nintendo console. What in the world is going on? Nick Thorpe takes the long journey back in time to find out…

THE LATEST NEWS FROM AUGUST 2002

Satoru Iwata had barely been in charge of Nintendo for a few minutes before hitting the headlines.

Satoru Iwata didn't take long to start making waves as the president of Nintendo. Taking the post after Hiroshi Yamauchi finally retired from the role, Iwata chose to say some very interesting things in his first speech. In outlining the differences between the company and its competitors, he claimed that Sony and Microsoft "seek to control the distribution of all types of entertainment". Explaining Nintendo's position, Iwata claimed, "We want to make games that are interesting. We'd be happy to work with any company that has new ideas for gaming." But the comments that set tongues wagging were related to hardware development. "No matter how many consoles Sony sells and whatever Microsoft does, it is important for us to make our software attractive enough to drive consumers to buy our hardware," said Iwata. "The effort to produce machines with better technology has reached its limit. If things continue, they may lead to the decline of the entire industry."

Magazines put two and two together, and got an answer of 27. In a report titled, 'Is GameCube Nintendo's last console?' *NGC* shied away from making any definitive claims regarding the company's exit from the console business, but did assert that these statements meant "GameCube will definitely be around a lot longer than the traditional five-year life-cycle of past generations". *GamesMaster* was characteristically less restrained, claiming "Ninty intend to do a Sega!" and that "top bods are quickly falling out of love with competing in the cutthroat console market". It reasoned that the company would "more than likely concentrate on making games and let Sony and Microsoft fight amongst themselves for console sales". We're sure that with your current knowledge, you can adequately judge their powers of prognostication. The saga of Rare also continued, with *NGC* reporting that a UK source had told them that Activision would soon be acquiring the company, and that the deal was essentially done but had just been delayed a little. But with the Stampers and Nintendo being typically quiet, nobody knew for sure.

The release schedules this month weren't too hot, but things weren't quite as dreary as they could have been. PC owners had a perfect excuse to avoid the sun, as *Neverwinter Nights* offered RPG fans plenty to do, and

[GameCube] Though it had an unusual premise, the card battler *Lost Kingdoms* was an unexpected treat.

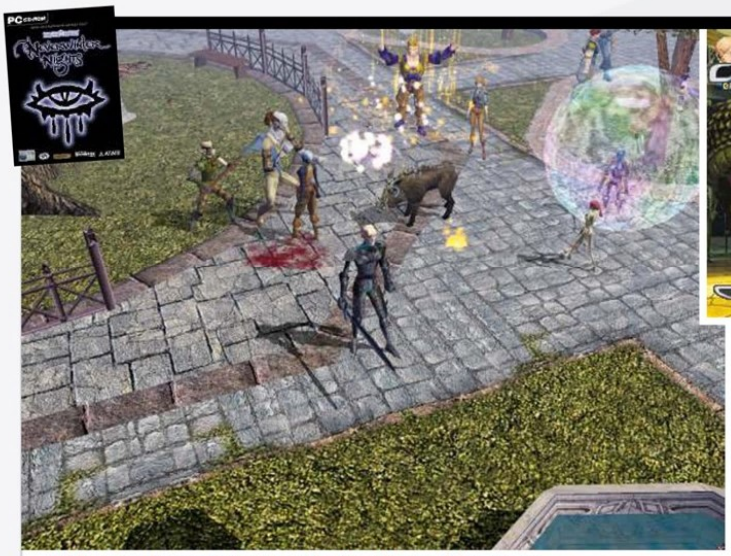
[GameCube] It was an import-only delicacy at this point, but *Eternal Darkness* was still deliciously maddening.

NEWS AUGUST 2002

Throughout the month, UK headlines were dominated by the disappearance of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman, a pair of ten-year-old schoolmates from Soham. They were first reported missing on 4 August, and a search lasting almost two weeks began. On 17 August, the bodies of the two girls were discovered by police, just hours after they had arrested Ian Huntley and Maxine Carr on suspicion of murder. The couple worked at the girls' school – Huntley as the caretaker and Carr as a teaching assistant.

Carr had provided a false alibi for Huntley early in the investigation. She was found guilty of perverting the course of justice, but not guilty of assisting an offender as she had acted in the belief that he was innocent. Carr received a prison sentence of three and a half years. Huntley initially feigned madness but was judged to be mentally sound. His defence pushed for the lesser charge of manslaughter. The jury rejected this and convicted Huntley of murder in December 2003, for which he received a life sentence that he is still serving.

On 25 August, ITV broadcast the first episode of *I'm A Celebrity… Get Me Out Of Here!*, a jungle-based reality show starring the likes of Darren Day, Tara Palmer-Tomkinson and Tony Blackburn. The show became enormously popular and is still running today.



[PC] *Neverwinter Nights* was the latest in a long line of great *Dungeons & Dragons* games.

[PlayStation] The conversion of *Capcom Vs SNK Pro* was a welcome sight for PlayStation owners.

[Xbox] Hands up – who was expecting *Buffy* to be a bit of a belter? Not us, if we're being honest.

plenty of people to do it with. Although *Edge* complained of "slightly suspect performance and a few minor design issues", the game still earned an impressive 9/10 score. BioWare's tightly designed campaign was praised for a plot that "begins to twist and turn most impressively," but it was in online and LAN play with friends that the game truly shined, which *Edge* felt made the game "a flagship for the platform".

The big surprise on the Xbox was *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, which defied general expectations of licensed games and proved to be decent. *GamesMaster* scored it 80%, as reviewer Tom East felt that it was a "fun and faithful adventure" that suffered from "spending too much time in *Tomb Raider* mode." *XBM* praised the game for featuring "expansive levels and creatively devised puzzles" in a 9/10 review.

The best GameCube release of the month was the rather unusual *Lost Kingdoms*, an action RPG with card collection and deckbuilding elements. *Edge* gave the game 8/10, as it felt that although the main character's movement was somewhat slow and that slow monster summoning speeds led to silly scenes, "*Lost Kingdoms* has the freshness, charm and vitality to overcome such imperfections." *NGC*'s Mark Walbank was similarly impressed, awarding the game 86% and expressing the hope that card battling was "hopefully going to be a burgeoning subgenre of games". Players with access to American GameCube releases got the better end of things this month though, as *Eternal Darkness* scored a whopping 9.5/10 in *Cube*. The Lovecraftian survival horror distinguished itself through creative effects that conveyed the deteriorating sanity of the game's various protagonists, who engaged in a battle spanning centuries and every region of the planet. Reviewer Chandra Nair felt that it "takes adventuring and horror to levels that *Tomb Raider* and *Resident Evil* will never reach".

Even PlayStation owners got a bit more love this month, as *Capcom Vs SNK Pro* finally made its way to Sony's venerable console. While the presentation fell a little way behind the arcade game's standard, the game design held up extremely well. *Official PlayStation 2 Magazine* awarded the game 8/10, praising the game for possessing "balanced gameplay, furious action, the coolest fighters". That made it one of the top three games of the issue – on the PS2, the only games to achieve the same score were extreme sports outing *Aggressive Inline* and the cover star *Stuntman*, which was an exclusive review. The game, which required players to complete difficult stunts with extreme precision, was judged by reviewer Mark Wyatt to be "refreshingly challenging and rewarding" but "not a game for anyone who has a low tolerance for maddening frustration".

Join us again next time, when we might have slightly less hyperbolic responses to speeches by industry executives. Then again, maybe not. *

CHARTS

AUGUST 2002

PLAYSTATION 2

1. Medal Of Honor: Frontline (EA)
2. Spider-Man (Activision)
3. Britney's Dance Beat (THQ)
4. Final Fantasy X (Sony)
5. Grand Theft Auto III (Rockstar)

XBOX

1. Spider-Man (Activision)
2. Halo: Combat Evolved (Microsoft)
3. Project Gotham Racing (Microsoft)
4. 2002 FIFA World Cup (EA)
5. Max Payne (Rockstar)

GAMECUBE

1. Pikmin (Nintendo)
2. Spider-Man (Activision)
3. Super Smash Bros Melee (Nintendo)
4. Star Wars: Rogue Leader (Activision)
5. Luigi's Mansion (Nintendo)

MUSIC

1. Crossroads (Blazin' Squad)
2. Round Round (Sugababes)
3. Addictive (Truth Hurts feat. Rakim)
4. What You Got (Abs)
5. Colourblind (Darius)

THIS MONTH IN...

Play

It's been a while since we've seen what *Play*'s readership has to say for itself, so let's take a look. "I personally am delighted at the return of Atari to game publishing," says reader Colin Waller. "Atari were masters at making games with immense playability." Maybe so Colin, but this is just Infogrames in Atari's clothing.

NGC

This month's issue features an Ideas Factory segment devoted exclusively to readers' ideas to improve the *Mario Kart* series. "There should be a fair few courses set in the Mushroom Kingdom, but there should also be some set elsewhere – maybe one could be inside Luigi's Mansion," suggests Peter Hignett. Patience, Peter…

Edge

"It's often forgotten that the games industry sells licences too – *Lara Croft* to a film studio or *Pokémon* to a lunchbox manufacturer," says *Edge*, in a feature asking whether licences and sequels are killing videogames. "Doubtless there are purist lunchbox-making craftsmen who bemoan such crass commercialism too." Erm, what?

1864
19:30
ACTIVISION

Pitfall!

SWING WHEN YOU'RE WINNING

» ATARI 2600 » 1982 » ACTIVISION

Poor old Pitfall Harry, he's the gaming mascot no one seems to care about anymore. Aside from an iOS game in 2012 the explorer has been all but forgotten by Activision, which is a shame.

While I never owned an Atari 2600 growing up, I had a number of friends who did, so I frequently had the opportunity to play on one after school or at the weekends. Thanks to friends like Paul Staddon I was introduced to the likes of *Combat*, *Frostbite* and countless other classics, but the one that I always pestered Paul to play was *Pitfall!*.

I loved *Pitfall!* and not just because it felt so advanced compared to many of the other 2600 games that Paul owned at the time. Pitfall Harry was every bit a draw to me as the game, mainly because I loved Indiana Jones (I used to make all my friends call me Indi-Darran Jones at school when both *Raiders Of The Lost Arc* and *Temple Of Doom* came out). Like Indiana Jones, Pitfall Harry explored jungles, loved treasure and was extremely athletic. For me, he was a hero to latch on to and latch on to him I did. *Pitfall!* would always be the game I asked to play whenever I visited a friend's house and it upset me greatly that the Amstrad never received a port, but the Commodore 64 did.

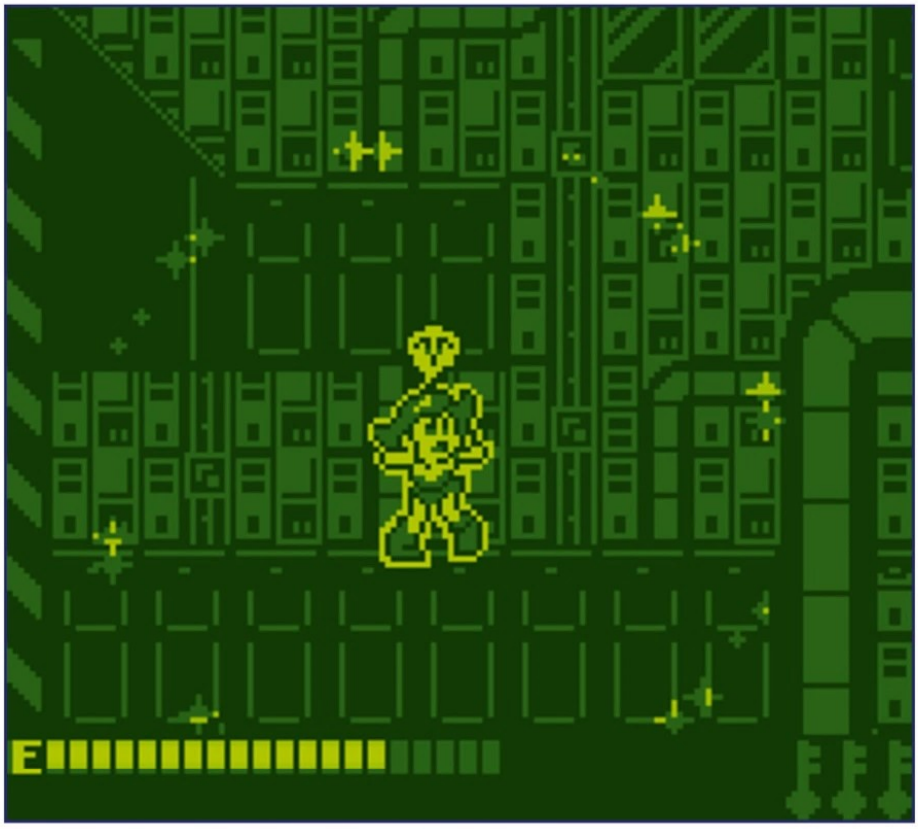
I would continue to follow the adventures of Pitfall Harry during the intervening years, and while he never rose to the same status as Mario or Sonic, I always used to be able to wring some enjoyment from his adventures. *Pitfall: The Mayan Adventure* was a solid 16-bit offering that featured the sort of splendiferous animation that was typically associated with the likes of Shiny Entertainment, while *Pitfall 3D: Beyond The Jungle* would reveal that Pitfall Harry sounded remarkably like Bruce Campbell.

The love affair for me, though, will always be with the original game, and while Pitfall Harry seems to now have been forgotten by Activision, he isn't lost to me. *

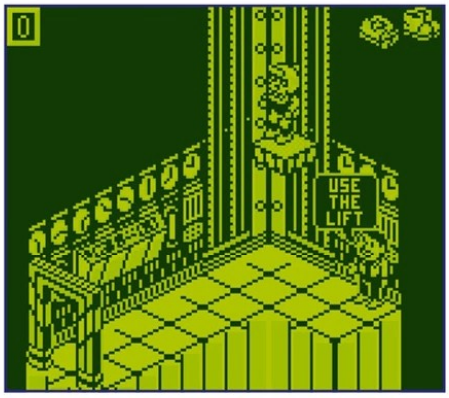
30 Years Of The GAME BOY®

THREE DECADES AFTER ITS LAUNCH, THE GAME BOY HAS BECOME MORE THAN A GAMING ICON – IT'S A TRUE CULTURAL PHENOMENON. WE TAKE A LOOK BACK AT HOW NINTENDO'S MACHINE ACHIEVED SUCH A RARE FEAT, AND SPEAK TO THOSE WHO ARE STILL FLYING THE FLAG FOR THE HANDHELD TODAY

Words by Nick Thorpe and Martyn Carroll



» [Game Boy] *Avenging Spirit* is one of the great rare games for Game Boy collectors to hunt down.



» [Game Boy] The Game Boy's array of licensed games were popular with younger gamers.

When the modern handheld console market developed in the late Eighties and early Nineties, it quickly became clear that one of the manufacturers was significantly more attuned to the challenges of creating a portable platform than the others. The designers of the Atari Lynx focused on pairing the familiar 6502 CPU with relatively high-end custom graphics technology, with Epyx giving the system arcade-style graphical features like sprite scaling. Sega and NEC focused on how they might leverage their existing hardware in a new environment, ultimately basing the Game Gear and PC Engine GT on the Master System and PC Engine respectively. All of these consoles seemed to be born of similar thinking: they were consoles designed in service of the games. They allowed players experiences close to what they'd get elsewhere, and allowed developers to continue using the techniques they had elsewhere. With the Game Boy, Nintendo approached the problem from the other end – the company designed the hardware in service of the gamer.

Nintendo reasoned that the ability to actually *play* the machine was more important than *what* it could play, and that less impressive software was a worthy sacrifice. As a result, more than most pieces of videogame hardware, the Game Boy is a product of compromise. Where other handhelds had colour screens, the Game Boy had four greyscale shades (or green, if you're staring at that original screen). The other machines were backlit, and Nintendo's hardware relied on getting just the right level of light. Nintendo even opted for a custom processor based on the Z80, rather than the 6502 used in the NES, meaning that its developers couldn't simply reuse code. But it didn't matter if it couldn't play *Super Mario Bros* – Nintendo could just make a new *Mario* game tailored to what the machine *could* do.

Not everybody was impressed – it has been said that there was even some deal of scepticism at Nintendo prior to launch. Even those who would later come to be associated with the platform didn't always get a great first impression. "I do remember when a neighbour classmate showed off his Game Boy to me. I'd guess this was summer 1991, since he was playing *Blades Of Steel*," says Johan Kotlinski, author of the Game Boy music tool Little Sound DJ. "Being outdoors in the sun, it was rather difficult to see what was [happening] on the screen, and it did not come off as a particularly compelling entertainment option. As you might remember, there were a lot of competition at the time – most of us kids had a Commodore 64, NES or even an Amiga, and for mobile gaming the Atari Lynx seemed more desirable, even if too expensive. I already had my *Tetris* needs served by an original C64 tape, and the Game Boy did not seem like an improvement at the time. Certainly the load times were much faster on the Game Boy, but we kids had lots of time to waste anyway."

But Nintendo had made a judgement call, and it paid off. "Even though it was underpowered and its screen had issues with ghosting and no lighting, all those things that kind of worked against it also worked in its favour – it made a very economical system," says ▶

BOY WONDERS

GAZ THOMAS, Developer of *Owyn's Adventure*

JEREMY PARISH, Author of *Game Boy Works*

MATHEW BOYLE, Game Boy collector

MINI MAKING OF...

PRINCE OF PERSIA

***ED MAGNIN** CONVERTED JORDAN MECHNER'S CLASSIC TO THE GAME BOY*

How did you end up working on the Game Boy and coding *Prince Of Persia*?

My boss woke up one day and decided to swap me from the NES to the Game Boy. It was the best thing he ever did. The Game Boy represented freedom for me. When I'd go to GDC or E3 I could carry my work in my pocket and walk up to a booth and show it to someone, no appointment necessary. I did *Caesars Palace* first, then *Prince Of Persia*.

Were you a fan of Jordan Mechner's original game?

I quickly became one. I played the PC version but knowing he did the original on the Apple II was even more impressive. I played the PC version constantly to make sure ours worked as well or better on the Game Boy.

Did you have any say in the cart size selected for the game, and was it a struggle to make it fit?

Publishers were cheap. They didn't want to pay for a larger cartridge or a battery to back-up RAM in the cartridge. It would have cost a dollar or two, but then multiplied by their mark-up that would have added five or six dollars to the price of the game. If you look back, only Nintendo and maybe one or two publishers ever released games on larger cartridges or with memory backup – the rest of us had to make convoluted password save systems. And yes, it was a struggle to make it fit.

You later did a second version of the game for the Game Boy Color. Did the updated hardware make for an easier conversion?

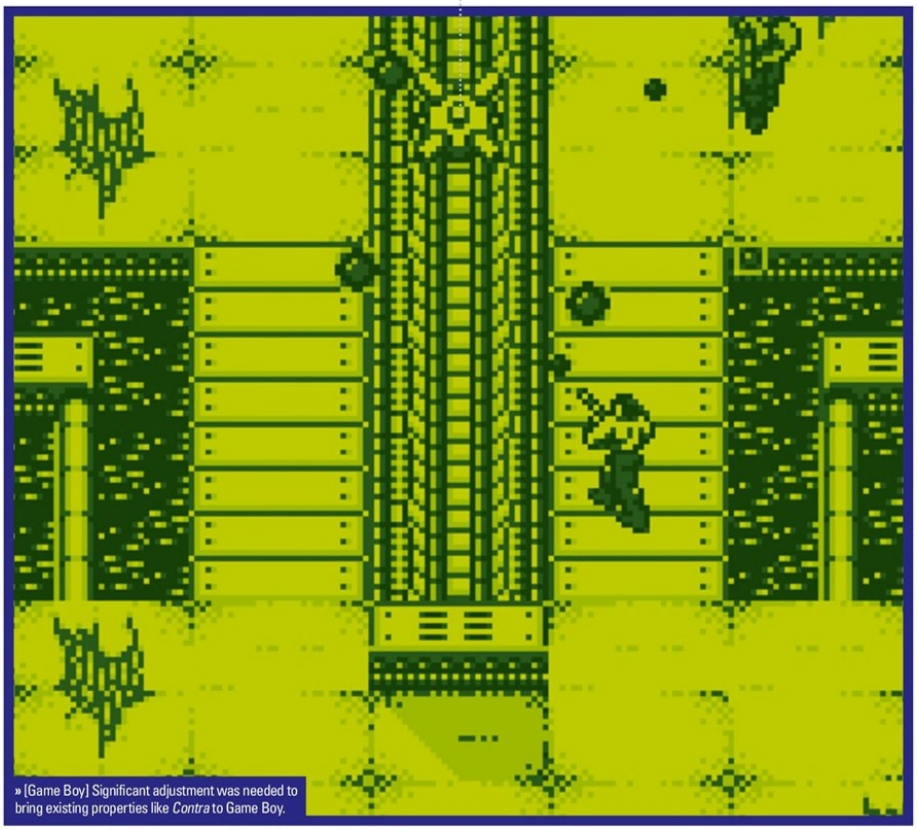
Not really. In addition to adding colour, Nintendo required developers to add additional levels or features, so we added a training level. At the very end of the project the Nintendo colour police (Club Wario) asked us to make every level a different colour. We had worked hard to make the palace and dungeon levels look really good, so we resisted changing colours. On a conference call I asked Nintendo, 'Do you want it to look good or do you want obvious use of colour?' They answered, 'Obvious use of colour.' That was it. We had to give them what they wanted or they wouldn't let us publish it.

> "It was the first time I had ever seen a console, let alone a handheld, and it was very exotic"
>
> Gaz Thomas

▶ Jeremy Parish, a veteran videogames journalist and creator of the *Game Boy Works* video and book series. The Game Boy was half the price of the more impressive Atari Lynx, and would run three times as long on fewer batteries. This made it attractive to parents, and the built-in display meant that it didn't tie up the TV. It was a viable purchase, even for families that already owned a console. "I first received a Game Boy for Christmas when I was a kid. I'd been trying to play my brother's NES and so I got my own portable system to keep peace in the house," says Mathew Boyle, a Game Boy fanatic whose game collection consists of approximately 800 games. "Of course, I was a bit too young I think to really appreciate it, but I would play *Kirby's Dream Land* until the batteries ran dry!"

As good as games like *Kirby's Dream Land* were, one game overshadowed the rest when it came to selling the system to players – including those with no previous gaming experience. "The first time I laid my eyes on a Game Boy was at my cousin's house, he had gotten one for Christmas. It had *Tetris* on it and he was showing my dad and I," says Gaz Thomas, an indie developer whose work includes *Owyn's Adventure* as well as contributions to *Hydroventure* and *Stealth, Inc.* "It was the first time I had ever seen a console, let alone a handheld, and it was very exotic. I was only five at the time but I could understand the game and the music was entrancing!" Indeed, *Tetris* could be universally understood and its new handheld home proved to be conducive to spreading the game's appeal. Plenty of young players would frequently find their systems being borrowed by parents and grandparents.

Indeed, while Sega and Sony get much of the credit for bringing older audiences into the videogaming market during the Nineties, Nintendo's machine had a killer app that appealed to players across all demographics. "It definitely did reach a broader spectrum of gamers than the NES did, and Nintendo recognised that from the very beginning," notes Jeremy. "Some of their early ads were targeted at working professionals and adults, promoting games like *Tetris* and saying, 'Hey, you can enjoy yourself when you're waiting at the airport – it's not just



» [Game Boy] Significant adjustment was needed to bring existing properties like *Contra* to Game Boy.

» [Game Boy] Puzzle games like *Pipe Dream* worked well with the Game Boy's blur-prone display.

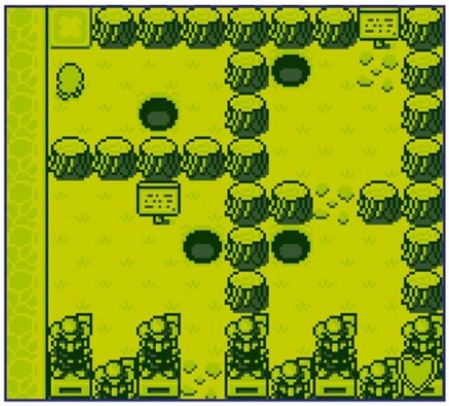
for kids, even though it's called the Game Boy.'" That campaign had the tag line "Have you had your fun today?" and deliberately targeted non-gaming media, appearing in magazines such as *GQ* as well as on TV. Even then-First Lady Hillary Clinton admitted to buying a Game Boy for herself in a 1993 interview with *Time* magazine, after having become a fan through playing her daughter's machine.

The Game Boy had a long tail, too. While the first couple of years played host to more major hits than later years, the hardware saw at least a few games hit the 1 million sales mark every single year. That's pretty remarkable, as Game Boy owners didn't buy a lot of games. Nintendo's figures show that just 4.22 pieces of software were sold for every piece of Game Boy/Game Boy Color hardware – a low number compared to the 8.07 games sold for each NES, or the 7.72 games for each SNES console. It didn't hurt that the system had a late hit in the form of *Pokémon Red & Blue* – the games gave the format a shot in the arm in Japan when introduced in 1996, and plenty of hand-me-down systems were dusted off when they made their way west in 1998 and 1999.

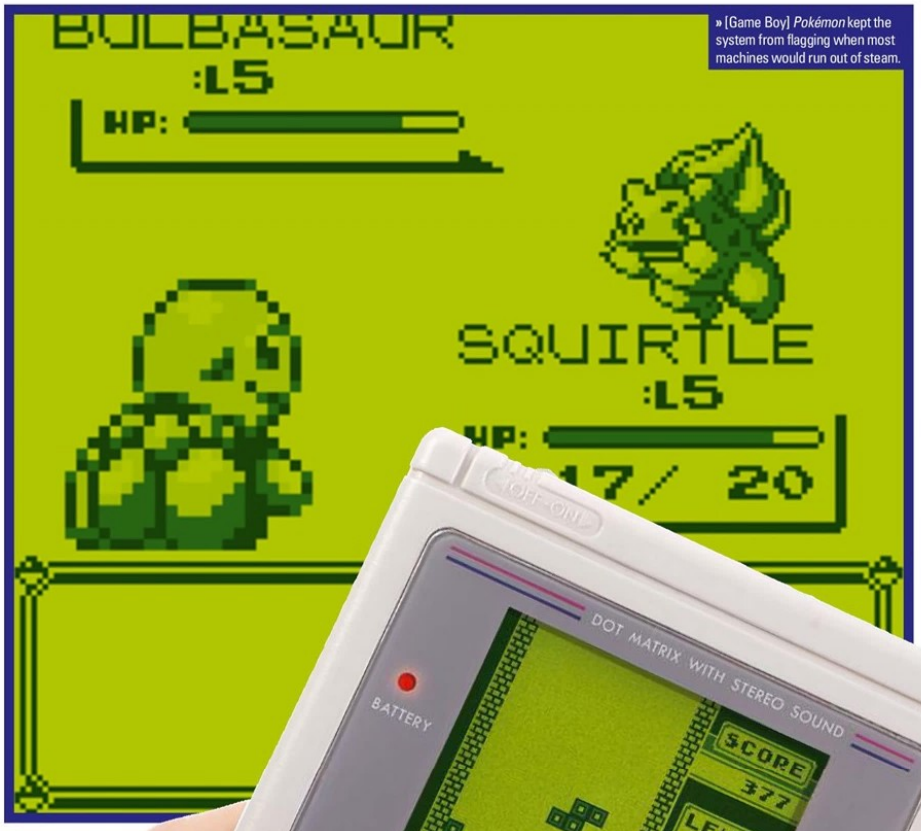
In the financial year ending March 1998, the Game Boy was old hardware (the Game Boy Color still having yet to be introduced) and the world was fixated on home consoles with 3D graphics. But even at what should have been its loweest ebb, the low cost and timeless library of the Game Boy, combined with the absence of any serious competition in the handheld console space, meant that Nintendo managed to sell through 10.37 million hardware units. The Game Boy Color was introduced just months later and revitalised hardware sales – and even though that model saw plenty of exclusive software, major releases including *Pokémon Gold & Silver* and *Dragon Warrior Monsters* still supported the old model. Only when the Game Boy Advance was released in 2001 did the classic system truly ride off into the glorious greyscale sunset.

That level of reach alone gives Game Boy nostalgia a much wider resonance than most other machines can claim. But there's something ▶

» [Game Boy] Bespoke Game Boy projects like *F-1 Race* sold in their millions, despite generic branding.

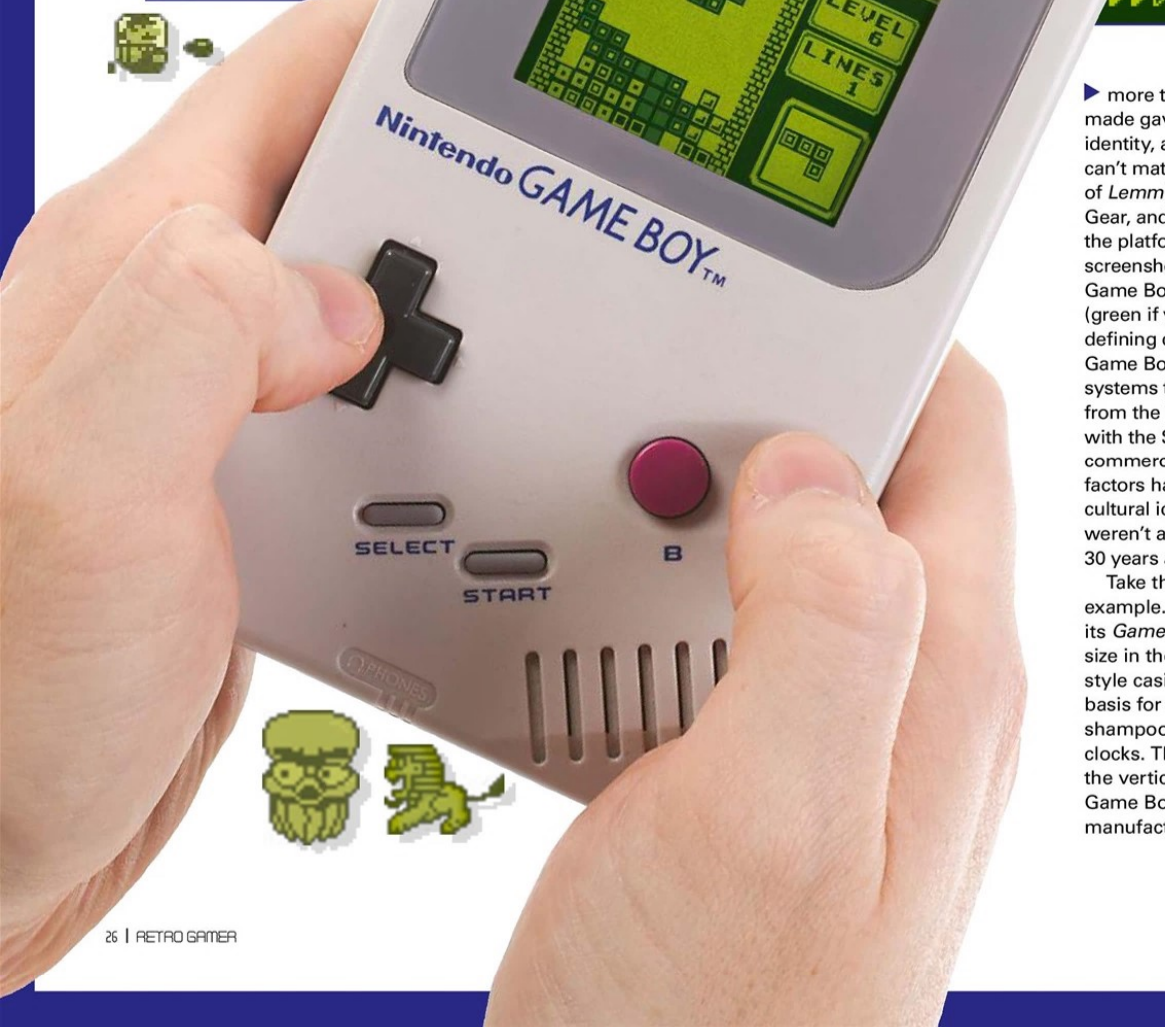


» [Game Boy] Games produced by Shigeru Miyamoto don't tend to fly under the radar, but *Mole Mania* has.



» [Game Boy] *Pokémon* kept the system from flagging when most machines would run out of steam.

» [PC] *Owyn's Adventure* was born from an organised effort to make Game Boy-style games.



more to it – the hardware choices Nintendo made gave the Game Boy a very distinctive identity, a look and feel that its competitors can't match. Show most people a screenshot of *Lemmings* on the Atari Lynx or the Game Gear, and they'd be hard-pressed to identify the platform. But when you show people a screenshot of the same game running on the Game Boy, there's no hesitation – the four shades (green if you're original, grey otherwise) are a defining characteristic of the platform. And the Game Boy sounds unique amongst Nintendo systems too, not inheriting its sound hardware from the NES or having anything in common with the SNES. Combined with its overwhelming commercial success, these unique distinguishing factors have turned the Game Boy into a true cultural icon, recognisable even to those who weren't around to experience the system's birth 30 years ago.

Take the form factor of the system, for example. When Nintendo chose to reintroduce its *Game & Watch* classics in mini keychain size in the Nineties, it did so in Game Boy-style casing. The machine has also been the basis for all sorts of novelty products, from shampoo bottles to drinking flasks and alarm clocks. Though Nintendo would abandon the vertical orientation beginning with the Game Boy Advance, it was widely imitated by manufacturers of lower-level handhelds in the

» [Game Boy] Game Boy games often offer unique takes on existing properties, like *Super Mario Land*'s shooting sections.

> "Both the Game Boy and the Spectrum are Z80, so I already had a head start"
>
> Jas Austin

Nineties, from cheap 'block game' handhelds to the likes of the Mega Duck and the Supervision. Even today, contemporary machines such as the Playdate draw clear inspiration from the Game Boy's classic design.

The limited display of the system has also been a visual inspiration for many, including Gaz, whose game *Owyn's Adventure* uses the Game Boy visual style. What inspired this choice? "I started *Owyn's Adventure* as an entry to the Unofficial Game Boy Jam run by my friend Jamie, who convinced me to take part away from another personal project that I'd gotten a creative block on," explains the developer. If you're a regular reader of our Homebrew section, you'll likely be familiar with such development drives. "It was two weeks to make as much as you could so long as the game featured just four shades of the Game Boy green. After two weeks I had some systems in and a rushed level, so I thought I'd spend a couple of weeks working on the level design but kept going as I was enjoying working on it so much."

The existence of an unofficial jam suggests that there's no shortage of people interested in making Game Boy-style games, and a look around the indie scene bears that out. Browse the online store for the Nintendo Switch and you'll find games like *Save Me, Mr Tako* and *Awesome Pea* that lift their limited colour palettes and green hues directly from the original model of the Game Boy. It's not just on the handheld platform that you'll find this reverence for Nintendo's original machine, either – PC games like *Madcap Castle* and *Squidlit* also pay homage to the system's distinctive display, while others like *Evoland 2* and *PlataGO!* include the Game Boy as one of many retro gaming styles. The look even goes beyond games, as mobile apps like Retrospecs, Bitstagram and Retroboy offer camera filters designed to produce images like the Game Boy Camera add-on. So what makes the look of the machine so popular with indie developers? "A couple reasons as to why the Game Boy aesthetic is popular come to mind," says Gaz. "Firstly the ▶

MINI MAKING OF...
ALIEN 3

***JAS AUSTIN** REVEALS THE STORY BEHIND HIS UNIQUE INTERPRETATION OF ALIEN 3*

You worked on the Spectrum before moving over to the Game Boy. Was it a smooth transition?

Yes, it was pretty smooth. Both the Game Boy and the Spectrum are Z80, so I already had a head start. What was new to me was hardware support – scrolling and sprites for example.

Were you able to watch the *Alien 3* movie prior to starting development?

Sadly no, but the team did get to attend a private screening in a small cinema in Leicester Square shortly before the film was released, which was pretty exciting for me. For the design we only had a copy of the script.

There must have been a temptation to do a typical 2D run-and-gun, like the other versions of the game?

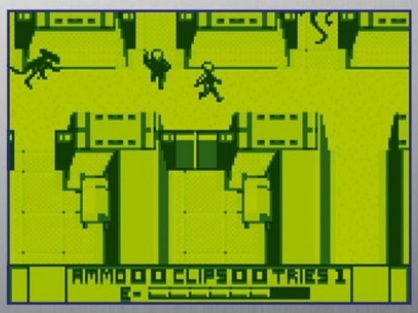
A side-view game was the obvious choice but we purposely avoided doing that. My last few games had all been side-scrollers and I was a bit sick of doing them, so I pushed for the idea of doing something top-down with a little less straight action. Plus at the time I had a feeling the other versions of *Alien 3* would be side-scrolling actions games and thought this would help our game stand out.

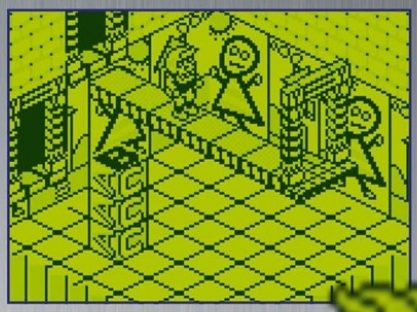
Did you receive any feedback – or interference – from the movie studio?

Fox had no feedback or input into the game design, I'm not sure back then that the film companies saw the games industry as anything important. However any larger graphics of the actors had to be signed off by Fox and the stars.

How long did the development last, and was it a smooth development?

It wasn't the smoothest development. I started on the game and made a very quick prototype to demonstrate the top-down scrolling view. But then I got pulled off the project to work on another game, *Spider-Man 2* if I recall. Sadly my replacement on *Alien 3* had to stop due to health reasons, so after finishing the *Spider-Man* game I jumped back on board. The previous coder's work wasn't something I could use so I went back to my original code. Because the development was now running late the pressure was on to get it finished. It was tough but I managed to finish the coding in about five weeks, which even back then was pretty quick.





MINI MAKING OF...

MONSTER MAX

JON RITMAN ON CREATING HIS MINI ISOMETRIC OPUS FOR THE GAME BOY

Did you find it easy moving on to Game Boy development, due to the Z80-like CPU?

Z80-like? Yeah, if they had castrated a Z80. No exchange registers, no index registers, no 16-bit additions or subtraction instructions. It was doable but also horrible.

Were you asked to create an isometric game in the style of *Head Over Heels*, or was it something you wanted to do?

I had just finished my own development program that Rare used for many games, and at that point I just wanted to use it for something myself. There were no isometric games for the Game Boy during that time, so I thought it would be an interesting challenge.

The monochrome screen was probably the Game Boy's biggest shortcoming. Did you have to mitigate for it during the design?

To be honest, as far as an isometric game was concerned the Spectrum was also monochrome, so no change there. The biggest problem with the screen on the Game Boy was that there wasn't a proper hi-res mode, so I had to mess about a lot to create one using interrupts to change modes as the raster passed over the screen.

The issues you had with the publisher are well known. Do you think the game would have had more impact if its release had been handled better?

If reviews made no difference at the time why would anyone bother to submit a game? *Monster Max* got great reviews when we finished it, but how many would remember it when it was eventually released nearly a year later?

Is it correct that Nintendo was interesting in publishing the game at one point?

Don't remind me that I made the biggest mistake of my career. Yes, Nintendo was interested but we would have had to remodel the main character to be one from the Nintendo stable. I can only plead tiredness for my failure to do so.

Finally, was a Game Boy version of *Match Day* ever considered?

I didn't think it would be possible to make a football game that I would be happy with on the Game Boy. I did think about it, but only for a very short time.

▶ instant nostalgia back to when we were younger – fun, easy-to-learn games. Secondly, for me especially, it lets you worry less when drawing the artwork. It takes a bit to get into the mindset of four colours but once you draw with them for a bit you learn to know when you've done enough." There are limitations, of course. "You can't go overly detailed or things just appear noisy and unreadable, less becomes more as players fill in the gaps."

As well as the four shades, many developers choose to employ the green screen – this is in spite of the fact that many players will have experienced Game Boy games on other systems that represent the system's graphics differently, such as the Game Boy Pocket, Super Game Boy and Game Boy Color. Indeed, even this magazine uses the green look for its Game Boy screenshots. Why is this such a crucial part of the look? For Gaz, it comes down to simple nostalgia. "The green is what people who have played on the original console think of when they hear 'Game Boy'. I've seen some great games with four shades but green represents the original console for me." Of course, one of the things that comes with imitating the style is that you can cherry pick the best bits of it, and one thing that tends to be left out is the motion blur that was characteristic of the early Game Boy systems. "I think developers don't chase the motion blur effect as it's not an aesthetic that lends itself to all gameplay types," explains Gaz. "A player who never used the console might even think it was a bug or glitch!"

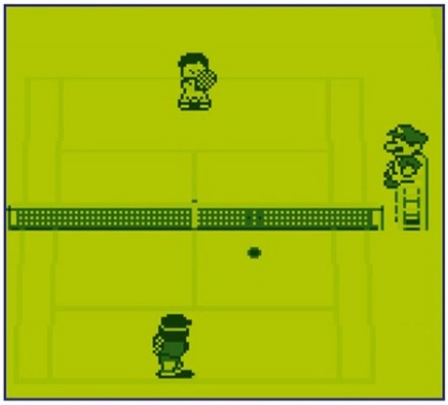
As you'll likely remember if you were around at the time, the sound of the console was popular too. In 1992, two of the Game Boy's flagship titles inspired singles that reached the top ten in the UK singles charts – *SuperMarioLand ft MC Mario* by Ambassadors Of Funk, and *Tetris* by Doctor Spin (in actuality, musical theatre composer Andrew Lloyd Webber and record producer Nigel Wright). British readers will also likely remember an Ariston advert which featured the title music from the Game Boy conversion of *RoboCop*. Those achievements are pretty astonishing, considering that the console's sound capabilities were very limited even by gaming standards at the time, and speak more to the system's massive popularity than its musical merits.

But the Game Boy's sound remains iconic way past the system's commercial heyday. With the rise of flashcarts, anyone can use homebrew programs like Nanoloop and LSDJ (Little Sound DJ) to turn their childhood handheld into a powerful instrument. But why create LSDJ in the first place? "The stars were aligned," says Johan. "I had put my heart into making music on the Amiga for a couple of years and was looking for something new. For a long time I had imagined a portable music-making tool, that would allow me to try out and annotate music ideas on the go." The choice of platform was more coincidental than deliberate. "Some of my friends were starting with Game Boy Color programming, I thought it seemed fun and assembly programming might even be a useful skill when looking for jobs. The Game Boy music programs at the time seemed rather limited and I thought making the best Game Boy music program could be my humble claim to fame – not that I imagined many would ever use it."

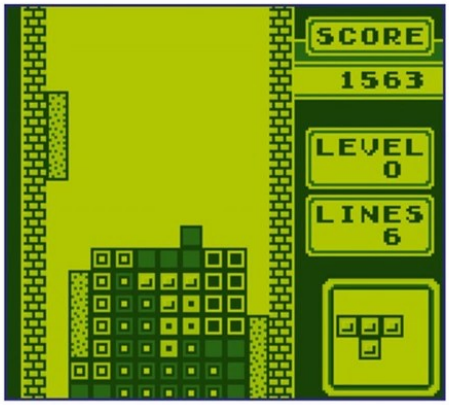
Johan's software did become rather popular, as chiptune artists have adopted the Game Boy as a favourite platform. What is it about the system that makes it so attractive? "The Game Boy sound is technically not that extraordinary and is maybe best characterized by its limited 4-bit dynamics. Time has shown though, that it is a rather good music system," he says.

"The green is what people who have played on the original console think of when they hear 'Game Boy'"

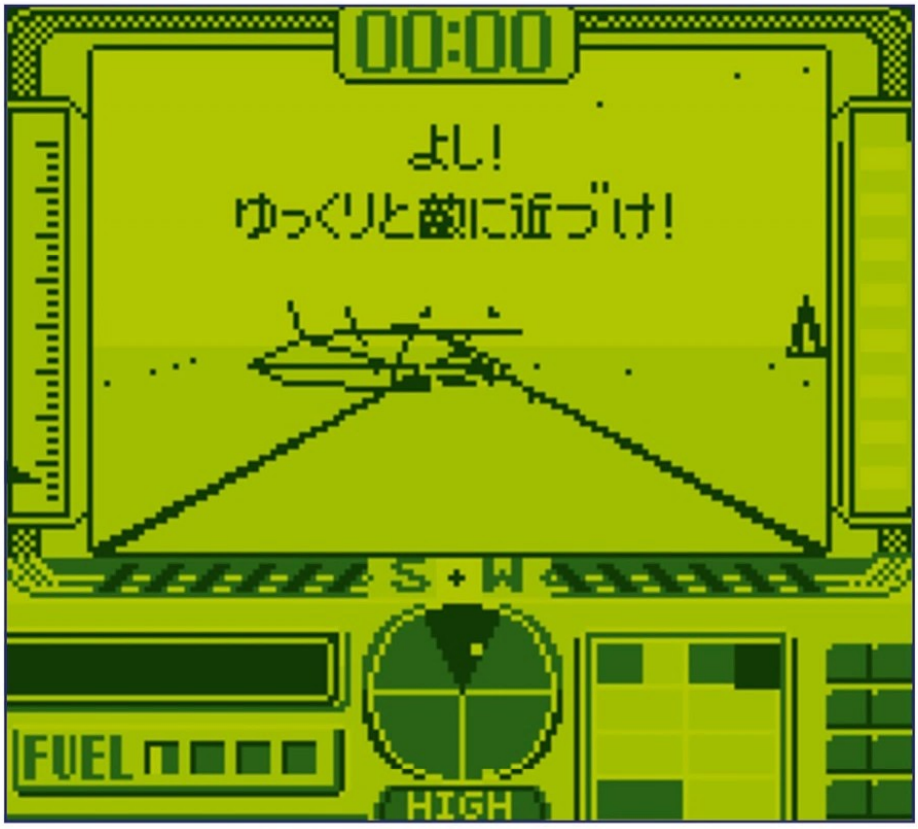
Gaz Thomas



» [Game Boy] Mario often turned up to boost the appeal of early games with generic branding, like *Tennis*.



» [Game Boy] The music of *Tetris* has inspired a number of musical tributes, including a top ten single.



» [Game Boy] Games like *X* proved that the a little programming wizardry could overcome the hardware's limits.

» [PC] Chipzel's Game Boy tunes were the soundtrack to indie hit *Super Hexagon*.

» [PC] *Squidlit* goes further than other Game Boy-inspired games, sticking to sprite restrictions and other limitations.

» [PC] Various indie developers interpret the Game Boy green differently, as seen in *Madcap Castle*.

"The capabilities are well balanced between two square wave channels, a programmable wave table and a noise generator, so it lends itself equally well to many music genres. It is easy to program and the Game Boy has ample RAM, ROM and decent processing power, so it's possible to splurge on things like nice UI, samples, soft synthesis, even going overboard with effects so that one can sculpt the sounds to ones desire. The serial port is a nice bonus, and crucially those square wave basses just happen to sound great in a big sound system."

LSDJ has gone on to become a key tool in the repertoire of many chiptune musicians – those who use it include popular acts such as Anamanaguchi, Toriena, Chipzel, DJ Scotch Egg and Trash80. "I'll mention Covox, Lo-bat and Goto80 since I did a lot of shows with them back in the day," adds Johan when asked about his favourite acts. Like the Game Boy graphical style, the Game Boy sound has even found its way back to games – Anamanaguchi did the *Scott Pilgrim* game soundtrack, Chipzel provided music for *Super Hexagon* and Toriena contributed to the recent *Team Sonic Racing*.

But while the hardware itself has had a considerable impact on our gaming culture, the Game Boy is like every other console in that the primary draw remains the games themselves. And the library manages to attract both old hands and new faces. Jeremy's *Game Boy Works* covers the Game Boy library in chronological order, and cultural significance is a big reason for the choice of platform. "Ever since Game Boy Color and Neo-Geo Pocket Color I've been a big fan of handheld gaming, and during the DS and the PSP's lifespan, I was a big advocate of those in the press. So I felt that maybe I should go back and look at the roots of portable gaming, the first major portable system to come out – and it still has so much heritage in gaming at this point," says Jeremy. But there's another factor that makes the library attractive too, and that's the fact that despite all the nostalgia, it still represents relatively fresh ground to cover. "There's not really that much coverage of Game Boy – even now, outside of the major titles ▶

MINI MAKING OF...

DONKEY KONG LAND III

IAN MANDERS CODED THE THIRD AND FINEST DONKEY KONG LAND

How did you land the job of coding *Donkey Kong Land 3* for Rare?

I started at Rare in 1994 and my first project was the SNES game Ken Griffey Jr's *Winning Run*. After that finished in early 1996, I was assigned to work on *Donkey Kong Land 3*. It used the same engine that Rob Harrison wrote from the ground up for *Donkey Kong Land 2*, but with lots of new gameplay features, as well as new map screens and bonus games.

What were the main challenges you faced from a coding perspective?

It was a new platform, to me, so I had to get up to speed with a different CPU, and the tighter constraints of the Game Boy – slower speed, less memory and the small pages of the Game Boy cartridges. It was an interesting challenge, though, and the immediacy of working with portable platforms resonated with me. For most of my career since that point I've developed software for portable games consoles and mobile phones.

The first two *Donkey Kong Land* games are quite close to their big brother SNES versions, whereas *Donkey Kong Land 3* does deviate from *Donkey Kong Country 3*. Was this a conscious decision?

We weren't given any significant directives one way or another and we were generally left to get on with it. Most attention at that time was paid to the Nintendo 64 games in development. We had the benefit of having a good starting point in the existing engine, so that gave us some breathing room to add some original elements.

The original Game Boy's monochrome screen wasn't amazing. Was there much you could do as a coder to improve clarity?

I think that was mostly in the hands of the artist. I don't remember having much influence over that. The artist, Keri Gunn, had lots of experience with creating great Game Boy graphics so it was in capable hands.

The first *Donkey Kong Land* on Game Boy reportedly sold in huge numbers. Were you privy to how well your sequel sold?

I remember hearing that *Donkey Kong Land 3* sold more than a million, which was great to hear for only the second game I'd worked on.

▶ – so it seemed like something interesting to do," he points out. "It's been a journey of discovery, which is what I really wanted to do because I missed out on Game Boy for most of its life. This is the chance for me to go back and experience the things that I didn't get to experience when they were new."

Going back and taking every release in turn has allowed Jeremy to gain insights on the system that he wouldn't necessarily have reached otherwise. "It had a lot of puzzle games, which I didn't really realise at the time," he tells us. "When I would play puzzle action games like *Adventures Of Lolo* or *Toki Tori*, I was like, 'Wow, this is really novel' and now that I've spent a lot of time with the Game Boy library I realise that these were really common and this was a huge genre, especially in Japan on early computers." Indeed, looking at the Japanese library is a gateway into a world of games that originated on the likes of the PC-88 and FM7, and plenty of other games made similar transitions. Since consumers expected simple, easy-to-grasp games on the Game Boy, developers used the console as a means of bringing classic games back to market. Arcade games like *Mr Do!*, *Heiankyo Alien* and *Donkey Kong* were revived on Game Boy, as were computer classics such as *Lode Runner*.

» [SNES] The Game Boy's display is part of its character, but players always desired colour solutions like the Super Game Boy.

The project has also allowed Jeremy to discover plenty of new favourites. "*Mercenary Force* was a great one, it's kind of like a horizontal shooter but you're controlling a team of mercenaries in feudal Japan. *The Sword Of Hope* was developed by Kemco, and Kemco made its mark on the NES by taking the ICOM *MacVenture* games and converting them, and *The Sword Of Hope* takes that framework and combines it with a *Dragon Quest*-style RPG. It's really interesting and distinct. I also like *Balloon Fight* and it didn't really occur to me until I started this project that *Balloon Kid* was a sequel and follow up to *Balloon Fight*, so I really enjoyed that one." It's fascinating that even for a long-time games journalist with a notable interest in retro games, there's so much unexplored territory. "There have been quite a few games since I've started this project that have been pleasant surprises or genuinely great. I don't think the Game Boy gets its fair due, honestly," he tells us.

One of the long-term devotees of the system is Mathew, who graduated from *Kirby* to *Super Mario Land*, and later to RPGs like *Pokémon* and *Dragon Warrior Monster*. "I've been collecting

» The Game Boy saw a lot of support from Nintendo, with big franchises making waves on the handheld console.

» Mathew Boyle's collection is enough to make any retro gamer Game Boy green with envy.

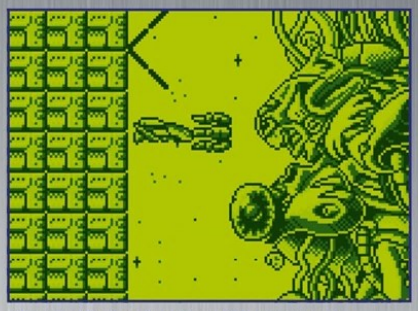
> "The games are very simplistic and there's a purity in that – devs couldn't rely on visuals"
>
> Mathew Boyle

for the Game Boy since I was about 11," says the collector. "I used to go to car boot sales and local retro stores with friends at the weekends. To be honest, it pretty much happened by accident – as I grew up with the system and its successors, I ended up with a pretty solid base of games and discovered new ones via emulation. I started filling in the gaps because honestly it'd stretch the money I'd get from my paper round a little more than buying a SNES game. Unboxed carts were usually only a couple of pounds, so it was worth gambling on games with interesting labels!" Eventually, this casual collecting turned into a more focused effort. "It wasn't until I moved to Denmark that I decided to go for a full set," he explains. "I managed to get the full European set a few years back (467 carts) and then I mopped up the hundred or so US exclusives last year. I think I'm somewhere around 200 of the Japanese exclusives, so I've probably nearing the 800 carts mark if I haven't already!"

So what is it that keeps players coming back to the Game Boy library? "I honestly think it's because the system's limitations made for great gameplay. The games are very simplistic and there's a purity in that – developers couldn't rely on visuals (or even colour), so it makes the experience all about play," Mathew replies. "I guess it also helps that the Game Boy came around at a time when games were in their infancy. Much like the indie games of today, a small team could make an experimental game with relatively little risk involved. I think it's a real testament to those studios, that you can hand an [original Game Boy] and some games to a six-year-old and they'll still have fun playing them!"

The Game Boy was never Nintendo's flagship product, yet there's a case to be made that it had the biggest impact of any of the company's hardware ventures. After all, what became of the adults who got hooked on their kids' copies of *Tetris*? They're the bedrock of today's casual gaming market, and they're probably still playing *Tetris* on their mobile phones. What became of *Pokémon*? It's still one of the biggest entertainment franchises in the world. What became of handheld consoles? They were established as viable alternatives to home devices, and Nintendo has been the driving force in their continued evolution. The company enjoys a similarly commanding position in that market now – even though the Game Boy line has been inactive for over a decade, the Nintendo DS line went on to even greater sales and the Switch is more or less unopposed today.

Because of that impact, we're still in love with the system today. You can see that in the people who still cherish the collections they amassed when growing up, as well as those who are discovering the library today. You see it in the Game Boy kids that have grown up and are now bringing the console's distinct style into their own projects – a style that exists purely because of the choices Nintendo made in service of creating a viable handheld console. If there's a lesson to be learned, it's that the best hardware will turn heads in the moment, but the best hardware for the job will create a lasting legacy. ✱



» [Game Boy] The Game Boy editions of *R-Type* are impressive, and well worth picking up.

MINI MAKING OF...

R-TYPE DX

***BOB PAPE** RECALLS THE BUMPER R-TYPE PACKAGE THAT DELIGHTED ALL GAME BOY OWNERS*

Did having the ZX Spectrum version of *R-Type* on your CV help you get the Game Boy *R-Type II* gig?

Well the original *R-Type* for the Game Boy was converted by Jas Austin but he was busy on another game, while I was free and had the experience of coding the Spectrum version. I don't know if it had been offered to anyone else but for my self-confidence I'd like to think my name was somewhere near the top of the list!

The pair of you later updated your R-Type games for *R-Type DX* on the Game Boy Color. What was the impetus there?

It was a quick money-spinner. The *DX* versions replaced the mono sprites and backgrounds with colour versions and I also added a brand-new backdrop to the third stage of *R-Type II*. We found out that it was very easy to convert an existing four-colour Game Boy game to a full(ish) colour one, so much so that perhaps the console should have been called the Game Boy Color-ised.

Besides the colour versions, *R-Type DX* also included the original mono games that could be enjoyed on both Game Boy and Game Boy Color. How did that work?

I had to add a piece of code to the mono Game Boy versions that checked if it was running on a Game Boy Color. If it was then it set the first four colours of the Game Boy Color palette to an approximation of the Game Boy, with a slight yellow tinge. Disregarding the differences in colour the Game Boy Color versions are pretty much identical to the originals. Nintendo did ask for some minor tweaks such as asking for the level one boss to be made harder to kill.

***R-Type DX* includes a cryptic messages on the end credits: 'For Arch Stanton, The World Is Yours?' Was this down to you?**

Yes, that's another of my little messages at the end. Arch Stanton plays a key part in the finale of *The Good, The Bad And The Ugly*, while 'The World Is Yours' is the motif that drives the protagonists of both versions of *Scarface*.

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MAKING FIRELORD

IN THE KNOW

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Words by Rory Milne

» [ZX Spectrum] *Firelord*'s hero begins his quest unarmed, although the game's early screens are relatively safe.

It's fair to say that Steve Crow was living the dream of many teenagers during the Eighties. A family friend's business published his first two games in 1983 and 1984, and then he started work on his third, *Wizard's Lair*, just as his business partners decided that his games weren't profitable. Following a change of publisher, Steve proved them wrong, firstly with *Wizard's Lair* and then its follow-up *Starquake*, and soon companies were falling over each other trying to sign his next game – *Firelord*, but things almost didn't go to plan, as Steve explains. "Bubble Bus published *Wizard's Lair* when I couldn't get anyone else to publish it," Steve admits candidly. "But it did really well with it, and then Hewson Consultants contacted me when I was doing *Starquake*. In the end, I decided I should go with Bubble Bus, because it treated me well. But once *Starquake* started getting reviews I realised it was going to be a big hit, and I got frustrated that Bubble Bus was only putting out half-page black-and-white adverts in magazines. So then with *Firelord*, I had already decided that I was going with Hewson."

Having settled on a publisher for *Firelord*, Steve next looked to the medieval architecture of his home county to inform his game's visual design and gameplay. "My whole inspiration for *Firelord* was where I grew up in Sussex," Steve notes. "I'd go cycling around all of these villages with timber-framed houses and thatched roofs; all the buildings were the same as they would have looked 300 years prior. So the whole game was based around the idea of what it would have been like 300 years ago in that area, and what kind of people you would expect to find."

In terms of the kind of person that *Firelord*'s medieval hero would be, Steve opted to give him a low rank, and this fed into his title's gameplay. "Since you started off as a serf in *Firelord*, or you were just a pageboy, my thinking was that you started at that level and that you had to build your way up from the bottom," Steve reasons. "So that included things like you wouldn't have a weapon to start with, and you had to get one."

Further gameplay elements followed, as Steve set limits on *Firelord*'s protagonist, which he depicted with energy bars ▶

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

WIZARD'S LAIR
SYSTEM: ZX SPECTRUM, VARIOUS
YEAR: 1985

STARQUAKE (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: ZX SPECTRUM, VARIOUS
YEAR: 1985

FIRELORD
SYSTEM: ZX SPECTRUM, VARIOUS
YEAR: 1986

» [ZX Spectrum] Magic defensive spells are rare in *Firelord*, but there's always one near the start of the game.

CONVERSION CAPERS

How Firelord compares on different systems

ZX SPECTRUM

■ Like many other Spectrum originals published by Hewson, *Firelord* packs a lot of colour into each of its flick-screen stages. This matters beyond being aesthetically pleasing, as the game has hundreds of levels, and so having different coloured buildings to use as landmarks is really helpful. The Spectrum *Firelord* also has great sound effects throughout, and even a little speech when you get caught stealing in the game's trading sections.

AMSTRAD CPC 464

■ Generally speaking, the Amstrad *Firelord* is a very accurate conversion, but it falls down on a couple of points. Firstly, it's rendered in the system's high-res four-colour mode, which is fine, except for the fact that this leaves a lot of the buildings in the game the same colour, which makes navigation tricky. Secondly, the CPC 464 iteration doesn't sound as good as the Spectrum original, despite having a far superior sound chip. Otherwise, it's a solid adaptation.

C64

■ First off, credit to the late C64 chiptune legend Ben Dalglish for the superlative medieval synthpop that greets players on loading up the C64 *Firelord*. That said, the game's sound effects aren't quite as good in places. In terms of visuals, the C64 *Firelord* is almost identical to the Spectrum original, although everything is depicted is slightly less vibrant tones. For some reason, its hero's face isn't cast in shadows, and there are dogs in its village streets, but in all other respects the C64 conversion perfectly replicates the game that it's based on.

GUIDE TO FIRELORD

How to master Steve Crow's magical adventure

CHART YOUR COURSE

■ *Firelord* is 512 screens in size, so making a map is a must if you plan to navigate its world without getting lost. No two village buildings are exactly the same size, shape and colour, so use those as landmarks when exploring the game's sprawling woodlands and rocky areas.

KNOW YOUR LIMITS

■ The ghostly villagers that haunt *Firelord*'s hero drain his limited energy. The magic he has to defend himself with, and his trading ability, are also finite. There are power-ups for these vital stats scattered around the game's world, but there are also hazards that deplete them.

HONOURABLE THIEF

■ The aim of *Firelord* is to lift a curse from an ancient land, but the game's inhabitants insist on charging the game's penniless hero for their services. This being the case, stealing from them is for the greater good, but as it's punishable by death it's best not to end up in the dock.

MAGIC PLACES

■ Trading objects for transportation spells only gets you so far, you also need to specify your destination by providing the symbols uniquely associated with it. Since these are only revealed by visiting it on-foot, transportation isn't viable until you've done a bit of walking around.

» *Firelord* was Steve Crow's final solo project. He's a senior artist for Blizzard Entertainment these days.

representing health, defensive magic and trading ability. "I guess the energy bars were like mana, and things like you get in modern games," Steve says. "I did the same in *Starquake*; there were three energy bars. It just meant that there were more things for you to pick up, because you could boost each one of the bars. I think they added depth."

But *Firelord* gained far greater depth when Steve decided to incorporate trading with non-player characters into his latest project, which he hoped would differentiate it from its arcade-inspired predecessor. "I was focusing on trading mechanics, rather than with *Starquake*, which was more gameplay mechanics – like laying bridges, going up elevators and flying little platforms," Steve explains. "I was trying to do more of a role-playing game or an adventure game, to get more of that kind of feel where there was more interaction and you met people, but on a very basic level obviously. It was to get a different type of game based around the same kind of visuals where you had the same running around."

But rather than limiting the trading in *Firelord* to bartering, Steve added the option of stealing objects and services. "I just thought it was a fun sort of element where you could take the chance of stealing something, and doing it quickly," Steve reflects. "It was to add an element of excitement to the trading – it was risk/reward. It introduced arcade gameplay into the trading part of the game, and it made the player use some skill in those sections."

Of course, it followed that unskilled pilferers would have to face justice, and so Steve devised a trial that worked within the restraints of *Firelord*'s host hardware. "I was thinking that if you got caught you would go to see a magistrate or you would have a court case," Steve ponders, "but that would have been too complicated to do in a game back then. So it just sort of ended up with an arrow going backwards and forwards between innocent and guilty getting faster and faster. I did play *Uridium* a lot; I loved that game, so maybe I got the idea from that."

Another aspect of *Firelord*'s trading became more complex, however, when Steve tasked different characters with trading disparate objects and services, instead of giving his game generic traders. "There was definitely an idea of progression with the trading," Steve observes, "it was about building things up and having different people do different things. I probably just based that on real life, you know, you don't buy bananas when you go to the butchers! Back then, every shop did its own thing. I think that's just how life was 30 years ago; you would go to certain people for certain things, and so I just incorporated that into the game."

One notable service that could be traded for in *Firelord* was teleportation, which worked by casting spells consisting of symbols revealed when entering one of the game's 'magic places.' "It was just taking the mechanic from *Starquake* but doing it with symbols as opposed to letters," Steve concedes, "because the maps just got so huge. So you would have to go somewhere else to learn those symbols, and then you could just teleport yourself. It was exactly the same as *Starquake* but implemented in a slightly different way."

But other areas of *Firelord* diverged more substantially from *Starquake*, such as its inventory system, which allowed four objects to be held and a further four stored with Ward Keepers. "I thought four objects was enough, and the Ward Keepers were like a bank," Steve points out. "Also, maybe some of my thinking there was that it made you travel around the map to go back to where you had left a thing with a Ward Keeper. I added that complexity because in *Starquake* you just picked up pieces of core, and then you went to the core and put them in."

» [ZX Spectrum] Stealing services is essential in *Firelord*, but getting caught lands you in a courtroom minigame.

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

■ Guessing which of *Firelord*'s characters have the game's four magic charms would be next to impossible. Thankfully, there are two wise men, a wizard and a bishop, that will trade information on their owners and what they want in return – you'll still have to track the charm holders down.

» [ZX Spectrum] *Firelord*'s hero can defend himself with magic when attacked by the ghosts of former villagers.

Besides collecting essential objects, such as defensive spells and items to trade, Steve set *Firelord*'s core challenge around obtaining four charms, which would have to be traded for, unlike his previous game, where objects were found lying around. "That was something I'd done with *Starquake*," Steve acknowledges, "but with *Firelord* you were interacting, and you would have to trade and you would have to build up to it. You couldn't just go to a location and get a thing. It was to create more gameplay, but also it was to create more interesting characters and an extra level to the game."

Unique hazards further distinguished *Firelord* from *Starquake* in the form of steady, intermittent and frozen flames, which may have also given Steve's latest project its name. "I was looking for an obstacle that was timed," Steve remembers. "I don't know why I chose flames particularly, but I think it was connected to the game being called *Firelord*. Maybe I was thinking that since there was fire across the land, the game's hero was the guy who could go through the fire, control it and unfreeze the flames. Or maybe I just started putting those fire mechanics in because it was convenient, and then the name *Firelord* came from that."

A second set of obstacles followed, but rather than relieving *Firelord*'s hero of lives, like the flames, the magic spells that Steve introduced to his game drained his hero's defensive magic. "I just wanted different hazards, where one drained your health and another drained your weapons," Steve says of the spells and the flames. "You could pick objects up that would boost those stats, but then you had to watch out for hazards that could take away from them. I thought that your trading ability was something that you built up, and so I didn't even think of taking that away."

But the time that Steve had poured into *Firelord*'s gameplay unfortunately led to the teenage developer missing his deadline, which in turn caused a falling out with his publisher. "Andrew Hewson called me up one day, and he was furious," Steve recollects. "This was in September, he needed to get the marketing done, and he was worried *Firelord* wasn't going to come out for Christmas. You know, I was a little bit behind, but ten days late is nothing, right? But, man! He shouted at me [...], and up until that point he had been pretty reasonable. Finally I put the phone down and said to my parents: 'He's going to sue us because I'm late on this game!' My parents were concerned, but they said: 'Oh, he can't do that.'"

Just as Steve's parents had predicted, *Firelord* was completed without matters having to be resolved in court, and the reward for its designer and his publishing firm on its release was overwhelmingly positive reviews and stellar sales. "It got fair reviews, but it didn't get quite as good reviews as *Starquake*," Steve recalls. "It sold well because Hewson Consultants was much better at marketing than Bubble Bus; it sold probably the same as *Starquake*, so I can't complain there. Hewson also converted it onto other platforms, and I worked with its programmers to help convert it onto the Amstrad and the C64."

> **"You know, I was a little bit behind, but ten days late is nothing, right? But, man! He shouted at me"**
> Steve Crow

When reviewing *Firelord* now, Steve offers a single tweak before approving of his classic title's vibrant visuals, but reflects on how he could have made more of its gameplay. "I would definitely give you a weapon to start with – that's fundamental!" he laughs. "It's hard to play, but I think that games back in the Eighties *were* hard. I like the graphics for what you could do back then on the Spectrum, and just the enormity of the map. But looking back at *Firelord*, I don't think I realised that I was starting to get into what we would now call an RPG. I didn't really value that aspect of the game; you know, I saw it as an end in itself. I thought about how to make *Firelord* more sophisticated than *Starquake*, but I never thought beyond that. So I think I was probably onto something, and didn't quite realise it."

» [ZX Spectrum] You can teleport to magic places situated around *Firelord*'s levels providing you know their spells.

FLYING MONK

GREEN NINJA

ULTIMATE GUIDE: NINJA SPIRIT

NINJA SPIRIT

One of the most stylish ninja-themed arcade games of the Eighties, Irem's Ninja Spirit mixed side-scrolling beat-'em-up action with innovative shoot-'em-up mechanics to create something totally unique

Words by Mike Bevan

PIT NINJA

» [Arcade] *Ninja Spirit* has some cool abilities, including this one which gives you multiple ninja clones.

Mention the word 'Irem' to any seasoned gamer and chances are that the first thing they'll think of will be the company's flagship shooter series, *R-Type*. But perhaps one of the Japanese coin-op developer's lesser known claims to fame is the fact that in 1984 it created the first side-scrolling beat-'em-up, *Spartan X*, better known to western audiences as *Kung Fu Master*. The game was also one of the first to feature an exclusively eastern setting, a sprawling pagoda inspired by the Bruce Lee martial arts movie, *Game Of Death*.

In 1988, a year after the release of *R-Type*, Irem returned to the side-scrolling brawler with two coin-op titles – the New York-based *Vigilante*, and a rather more intriguing return to a world influenced by eastern mysticism, *Ninja Spirit*. Released in Japan as *Tsukikage: The Legend Of The White Wolf*, the title screen announces "the last way of the ninja" in Japanese script, and the gameplay owes more to arcade games like *Shinobi* and *Black Tiger* than *Kung Fu Master*, while very much being its own katana-wielding, shuriken-flinging beast.

» [Arcade] The visual design of *Ninja Spirit* really is exceptional in places thanks to some truly exquisite sprite work.

Ninja Spirit's admittedly superficial plot concerns lone hero Tsukikage (translated as 'Moonlight' in English) on a quest through Japan to avenge his father, who has been murdered by a mysterious sorcerer demon. In gaming terms, this equates to running a gauntlet of seven increasingly challenging stages in which scores of constantly spawning enemies try to kill you with lightning accuracy, which this being an Irem title isn't overly surprising. From Moonlight's first appearance in a ruined shrine he's beset by ninja baddies lunging through the air at him with daggers, throwing knives in multiple directions, and even trying to spear him from under the floorboards.

Luckily our protagonist is equipped with a set of four useful weapons, a katana (Righteous Cloud), throwing stars (Swirling Leaf), bombs (Bamboo Thunder), and a nifty sickle and chain (Rising Dragon). The default weapon, the katana, is probably the most useful for the majority of the game, as it slices in a wide arc above Moonlight's head, and effectively blocks most projectiles. Throwing stars are useful at range and can be powered up to be flung rapidly three at a time. Bombs are extremely powerful and best used against bosses, while the sickle and chain also blocks enemy bullets, and can be swirled around the screen in the game's coolest looking attack move, the downside being that it's a little slower than the other weapons.

All weapons can be upgraded once by picking up power-ups left after killing orange ninjas, with the katana being top priority as ▶

BOSS RUSH

How to vanquish this horde of devilish bad guys

ASURA

■ After running a gauntlet of ninjas through the first stage this statuesque demigod rises from the ground. Thankfully he's fairly weak and his attacks are easy to avoid. A handful of attacks will easily finish him off.

AXE OGRE

■ This bizarre tree-dwelling demon starts in the centre of the screen and will track your movements. His attacks aren't quick but they will fell you in one swoop so keep moving in between using your bombs.

HANZO THE FIEND

■ This towering ninja has a huge sabre, so get ready to high-jump over it if he gets close. The main problem, though, are his riflemen henchmen. You might want to switch between your sword and bombs.

ENCHANTED STONES

■ This boss' method of attack is to try and make ninja squash out of you. The two stones take turns at targeting you and it's easy to make a bad move and end up being flattened. Avoid the corners of the screen!

WIND DEMONS

■ This giant kite packed with ninjas is definitely one of the tougher bosses. The sickle weapon is useful for blocking projectiles, and if you see an opening, chuck a few bombs and pray.

GHOST WARRIORS

■ These powerful zombie warriors make for a hectic fight because they seem to warp in randomly. Your only hope is your bombs, if you still have them powered up. If not you're going to be in a bit of trouble.

SORCERER

■ Congratulations, you've made it to the final boss. The lightning bolts he fires track you, so some deft manoeuvring and jumping will be required to beat him. Good luck, and may the ninja spirit be with you.

BROWN NINJA

KITE SOLDIER

CONVERSION CAPERS

We take a look at the different ports of Ninja Spirit

ATARI ST

■ The 16-bit home computer versions of *Ninja Spirit* are credited to Mediagenic, the short-lived successor to Activision. The Atari ST version isn't bad, but suffers from a sluggish feel to the controls, plus the awkward need to press a direction on the joystick to attack.

AMIGA

■ The Amiga conversion appears to be based directly on the Atari ST port and suffers the same control issues, reduced colour palette and lack of background planes. Like the ST port, there are no in-game sound effects, but this version has a much better soundtrack.

COMMODORE 64

■ The C64 port was by Chris Butler, the genius behind popular conversions of *Commando*, *Ghosts 'N Goblins* and *Space Harrier*. It's a reasonably impressive effort, though it suffers from scaled-back sprites, but with a great remix of the original arcade music by Martin Walker.

ZX SPECTRUM

■ In some ways the Speccy port is the most authentic of the 8-bit computer version in terms of the scale of the backgrounds and size of the in-game characters. However, it does suffer from screen flicker and the busy backgrounds sometimes make it hard to spot enemies.

» [Arcade] In this stage Moonlight can flip between the floor and the ceiling, but unfortunately so can his enemies.

» [Arcade] The aggravating pit section sees you falling down a vertical shaft with very little control over your character.

it will add a trail of hollow circular blasts along the arc of its swing that'll hold off smaller bad guys for a while. *Ninja Spirit* isn't a game to hang around in, though, the main impetus apart from the throngs of enemies being a timer that ticks down as you push forwards towards the boss. Moonlight's ability to leap across the screen like an escapee from *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is definitely an advantage in this respect.

The most innovative power-up in the game though is arguably the ability to gain up to two of the ninja 'spirits' of the game's title, an idea so good it was later pinched by Tecmo for *Ninja Gaiden II*. These take the form of clones of your character that shadow your every move and attack as you do, much like the Option power-ups from *Gradius*. In later stages one of the game's pickups even gives you a *Gradius*-style shield that looks like a fiery skipping-rope rotating around your character and your spirit clones.

It's this powering up aspect of the game that gives *Ninja Spirit* a feel much more in sync with stablemate *R-Type* than *Vigilante* or *Kung Fu Master*, with a fully tooled-up Moonlight filling the screen with sword swipes, multiple shuriken, bombs and swirling chains and cutting through lesser baddies with ease. The pace of the game is certainly more akin to a shoot-'em-up than most arcade action games, but the downside of this approach is that, similarly to *R-Type*, things can rapidly go downhill if you die and lose all your upgrades. *Ninja Spirit* can be stubbornly difficult at times, but like *Dark Souls* the satisfaction of taking on a stage or boss without dying rewards persistence, observing attacks and the mastery of your various weapons.

Visually, *Ninja Spirit* sports the pastel-toned, finely detailed look of Irem games of this period, and although there's nothing quite as impressive as *R-Type*'s famous mothership, the backgrounds and characters neatly exude the atmosphere of an otherworldly

ASURA

AMSTRAD CPC

■ Unfortunately the Amstrad port is the worst of the game's conversions, with a decent enough colour palette, and blocky-looking sprites and backgrounds. It's just horribly slow, feeling about a quarter of the speed of the arcade version, and the scrolling is a lot jerkier than on the Spectrum.

GAME BOY

■ Produced by British studio Bits, which gave us the excellent Game Boy iteration of *R-Type*, this is a great conversion, although possibly the easiest to play due to lacking as many enemies on the screen as the others. The bosses do seem to take quite a few more hits to compensate, though.

PC ENGINE/TG-16

■ The PC Engine port is by far the closest to the arcade game in terms of gameplay and graphics, and has the bonus of being less punishing by allowing your ninja to be hit up to five times before dying. Purists, however, can always switch to the hardcore one-hit coin-op mode.

CAVE HERMIT

RED NINJA

SICKLE NINJA

"The pace of the game is certainly more akin to a shoot-'em-up than most arcade action games"

medieval Japan. The stages are varied enough to keep things interesting, encompassing abandoned ruins, forests, moonlit prairies, and a couple of vertically scrolling sections involving a cliff climb to a surreal kite boss, and a descent into a cavernous pit. There's even a couple of sections where Moonlight can flip between traversing the floor and the ceiling, Strider style.

Outside of the arcades, *Ninja Spirit* was probably best known from its home conversions by Activision, which, due to the technically ambitious nature of the original, couldn't really fully capture the look, speed and playability of the arcade original. The closest port is definitely the PC Engine/TurboGrafx-16 version, which has the added advantage of allowing players to take a number of hits before dying, making finishing the game a rather more achievable prospect for the majority of players. This version adds a few graphical extras, including a short introductory sequence showing Moonlight's father being killed and a brief glimpse of his spirit wolf form, as well as improved animated backgrounds on the thunder cloud stage.

In retrospect, *Ninja Spirit* might be one of Irem's most overlooked and underappreciated arcade games, never receiving even a sniff of a sequel, which is a shame, as it's certainly one of the stand-outs of the company's late Eighties output. Being able to play as three identical ninjas at the same time is a pretty unique experience in 2D gaming of its era, and although its home conversions didn't quite do it justice, it's worth picking up the re-release of the PC Engine version on the Wii Virtual Console, or DotEmu's *Irem Arcade Hits* for Windows, which includes *Ninja Spirit* plus seventeen other classic emulated Irem coin-op titles. ★

» [Game Boy] This truly bizarre crossover from Irem features Moonlight and a host of other classic Irem heroes and villains.

SHUYAKU SENTAI IREM FIGHTER

Want more Moonlight? Check this out

Although *Ninja Spirit* never had a dedicated sequel, its hero, Moonlight, does appear in this crossover released only in Japan for the Game Boy. Sporting a surreal cover which appears to show Hammerin' Harry riding an R-9 fighter like a bucking bronco, *Irem Fighter* isn't so much a fighting game as a card battling hybrid. Sporting a host of characters and vehicles from Irem's history, if you've ever wondered who'd win in a fight between Kid Niki, Mr Heli and Dobkeratops this could be up your alley.

SPIRIT WOLF

ORANGE NINJA

GREY NINJA

MOONLIGHT

MR RYUICHI

BAMBOO

RIFLEMAN

GMC fact

■ The Game Gear will always run your games at 60Hz, so PAL gamers who don't wish to modify their Master Systems may find this to be a good way to experience games at full speed.

Gear Master Converter

» **PLATFORM:** GAME GEAR » **RELEASED:** 1991
» **COST:** £34.99 (LAUNCH), £5+ (NOW, UNBOXED), £20+ (NOW, BOXED)

Rather than building a brand-new piece of hardware for the handheld market, as Atari and Nintendo had with the Lynx and Game Boy respectively, Sega chose to base the Game Gear on the existing specification of its Master System console. This approach came with a selection of advantages and disadvantages – while Game Gear games would never impress like Lynx games due to the dated hardware, Sega could migrate its Master System developers over easily, and new games could be developed for both home and portable systems simultaneously. In fact, the two machines were so compatible that some Game Gear games run natively in Master System mode, such as *Out Run Europa*.

Since the two machines were so compatible, a Hong Kong-based company named Kalplus devised a simple cartridge adapter, allowing the Game Gear to run Master System cartridges. Some games didn't work – particularly those that required certain peripherals, as well as the likes of *Out Run* and *Phantasy Star*. However, the majority of Master System games will run via the Gear Master Converter with no problems, although some certainly fare better than others on the console's low resolution LCD display. Stay away from text-heavy games and games with small objects and you should be fine. ✱

ESSENTIAL GAME PSYCHO FOX

To be fair, the Game Gear is hardly short of good platform games to begin with, so adding this one might seem like an odd choice. However, this one never made it to the portable platform and it's actually a little more convenient to play on the handheld, as you don't need to go over to the console and hit the pause button every time you want to transform into a different animal. The bright, chunky graphics also ensure that you won't have any problems playing the game on the Game Gear's smaller screen, as there are no small details to miss.

FUEL
SCORE 000000

THE MAKING OF LOCO

Time flies by when you're the driver of a train, especially if it's a fast-paced arcade shooter turned dodge-'em-up coded by C64 wizard Tony Crowther

Words by Paul Drury

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** ALLIGATA
- **DEVELOPER:** TONY CROWTHER
- **RELEASED:** 1984
- **PLATFORM:** COMMODORE 64
- **GENRE:** CHUFF-'EM-UP

It's the summer of 1984 and Tony Crowther and his family are promenading along Blackpool seafront, when the 19-year-old Tony decides to turn it into something of a busman's holiday. Having coded *Bug Blaster* and *Bat Attack* the previous year, clones of *Centipede* and *Galaxian* respectively, he slips into an arcade to see if there are any coin-op titles which might inspire him. He stumbles upon a train-themed game he's not seen before and begins to watch it intently. Not play it, you understand. Just watch.

» [C64] We're not sure if the station master is waving you off or flipping you the bird here.

"I wasn't keen on spending money on them," laughs Tony, "plus I wasn't very good, so I'd watch other people play. I watched for about ten minutes or so before my mum said, 'Come on, we're going,' and then went home to Sheffield and did my version! I thought I knew everything about the game – even the music, which I was sure was Jean-Michel Jarre."

Tony is reminiscing about that fortuitous summer holiday sat in the canteen of Sumo Digital, the Sheffield-based developer where he has worked since 2011. The game that caught his eye that day was *Super Locomotive*, a rare 1982 release from Sega, and what captured his imagination was the amount of scrolling the game utilised. "I was really into scrolling games, kind of addicted to them, and this had two speed scrolling," he recalls. "I thought it was a way I could push myself to somewhere new."

Once home, he drew a few ideas out on paper, planned what percentage of the screen would be scrolling for each 'section' and at what speed and soon got the technical side of things moving smoothly. We ask what his thinking was in moving the track layout to the bottom of the screen and the view of the train to the top, which is the opposite setup to the arcade game? He looks at us

with bemusement. "What, did I swap them round? I could have sworn that was how it was supposed to be. I was only watching for ten minutes…"

That's right, Tony took no notes during his brief spell with the coin-op and so it is particularly impressive just how many elements of the original game made it into his home version. Your steam train puffs past a pastoral backdrop, while planes and airships, the latter emblazoned with Tony's initials, fly overhead, dropping bombs on your little engine. Well-timed bursts of smoke from your chimney will see off enemies above while releasing steam from the front of your cab will dispose of dynamite-laden handcarts let loose on the interweaving network of track you must traverse between stations. Switching train lines is vital, not only to avoid deadly collisions but to collect fuel and keep your engine running. There is a lot happening on the screen, which meant some trickery to overcome the hardware limitations of the C64, with interrupts used to split the screen into 'segments' and then the eight sprites used on the upper screen could be 'recycled' to display different objects in the bottom section. And all this took Tony just a fortnight to finish.

"I'd set myself a challenge for each day and I wouldn't go to bed until it was done, which could take me two days sometimes," he grins. "I was working in the Alligata offices in the day, in the back room just next to these big tape duplicating machines, and then I'd carry on at home in the evenings. I worked solidly for those two weeks but it never bothered me. I was young and loved it."

Tony's work rate was impressive. He produced six C64 titles during 1984 alone, including hits like *Monty Mole* and *Son Of Blagger*, by setting himself the target of coding a game in two or three weeks and then having the following month off to visit various videogaming publications to promote his latest work and generally enjoy himself in the Big Smoke. In fact, the many journeys south actually helped him create the background landscapes for *Loco*. "I used to travel on the train a lot, going down to visit the gaming magazines in London," he recalls, wistfully. "I'd visit Stuart Cooke at *Your Commodore* quite regularly and I did all the graphics for *Loco* from my head so maybe those trips had an influence… and I did watch *Thomas The Tank Engine* as a child so there may be a connection there."

If you look carefully as you speed through one of *Loco*'s station, you'll indeed see a slightly

» [C64] With bombs the size of planes you'll need to perfect your smoke puffs fast.

slimmed down incarnation of the Fat Controller, waving you onward. He awards you a flag each time you pass him and if you collect five, you move on to the next level. A crash robs you of any flags accrued though, meaning you have to clear five stations without losing a life to progress, a big ask even for the most skilled of drivers. Tony, surely that was overly harsh?

"Erm, I was just saving the player from the even harder challenge of later levels," he offers, rather unconvincingly. "That was what games ▶

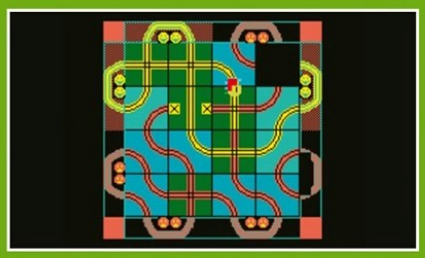
LONG TRAIN RUNNING

Go loco with these Eighties train games

SUPER LOCOMOTIVE

1982

■ The original inspiration for *Loco*, this may well be new to you as it's thought only 20 machines made it into UK arcades. It adds traffic lights to the track-switching gameplay and is worth tracking down, or looking up on YouTube, if only to compare and contrast with Tony's work.



LOCO-MOTION

1982

■ Konami reimagined one of those old slide puzzles as a series of train tracks and tasked you with keeping you engine on the right lines to pick up passengers and avoid crashes. An intriguing puzzler that was converted to many home micros of the day.

STOP THE EXPRESS

1983

■ Infamous for its mangled 'Congraturation! You Sucsess!' end of level message, this has our hero dashing along the top of a moving train, dodging enemy fire, in classic action movie style. It's fun for five minutes or so, and then you'll want to take the title literally. [Awww, I really like it - Ed]

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

SON OF BLAGGER
SYSTEM: C64
YEAR: 1983

N20
SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION
YEAR: 1998

TEAM SONIC RACING
SYSTEM: VARIOUS
YEAR: 2019

▶ were like back then. You die, you go back to the start. There was no playtesting – it was all just me. The thing was, it was only on my machine so if someone wanted to play it, I had to stop working on it."

Yes, *Loco* was developed on an actual Commodore 64. There was no fancy development system at Alligata so Tony would just save the game to tape each day, stick his trusty C64 in his duffle bag and take it back and forth between home and the office. One aspect of the game which was done wholly in his bedroom was the music, a collaboration with his old friend and SID chip maestro Ben Daglish, who sadly passed away last year. "I was 100 per cent sure the music in the arcade game was *Equinox 5* by Jean-Michel Jarre," says Tony. "I can read sheet music but what I can't do is hear something and know what notes they are… but Ben could! I played the LP, he hummed it, worked it out in his head and then coded it up. It only took him a couple of hours.

Later, much later, when I saw the arcade machine again I realised, 'Oh God, that's *Rydeen* by Yellow Magic Orchestra!' I actually think the music was a big reason for the game's success. I only have happy memories of Ben. I never had a bad day with him. We were always good friends."

The stirring soundtrack, polished visuals and frantic gameplay all combined to create a fine game which was well received by the gaming press. *Commodore Horizons* gave it 9/10 in their review and *Personal Computer Games* awarded it the same score and made it its 'Game Of The Month' in July 1984, producing a pull-out poster which adorned your correspondent's bedroom wall for many years. *Loco* also attracted much attention at that year's *Personal Computer World* show in London, and Tony clearly recalls a certain long-haired, lairy visitor to the Alligata stand.

"We were getting loads of interest, partly because of the music for *Loco* and also we had a Formula One car on our stand that Mike [Mahoney, Alligata boss] had sponsored, and over comes Fish, the lead singer of Marillion. I didn't know who he was at the time. He started talking to us and we started drinking. A lot. I had to be carried to my room. As far as I know, he was fine."

A cautionary reminder that one should never drink like a Fish. Tony's game did well commercially, too, and for the first time earned the developer a tidy royalty payment of £1,000 on top of his annual salary of £3,500. After *Loco* was done, Ian Stewart, owner of Sheffield's Just Micro computer shop, tempted Tony away from Alligata to set up Gremlin Graphics as a director of the company. "*Loco* was the best scrolling game I'd done so far and did cause a buzz," remembers Tony, "but as soon as I left Alligata, they stopped paying me royalties for it! They said it was in my contract. I said I couldn't remember that, but it turned out they had asked me to sign it at the office Christmas party and I must have been drunk."

» Tony revisits *Loco* at Sumo Digital HQ in Sheffield.

» [C64] A direct hit on your engine sees it explode spectacularly.

THE TRAIN GAME

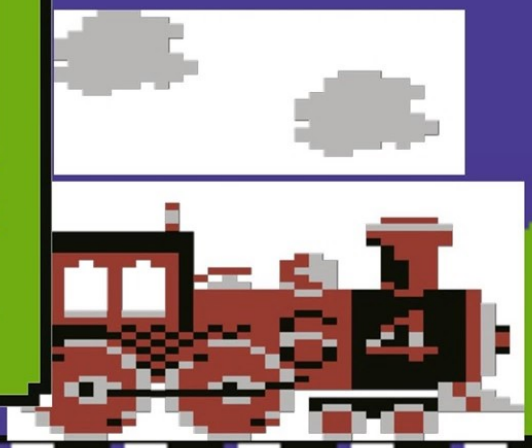
1983

■ This ZX Spectrum game caters to your inner Fat Controller as you aim to keep up to three trains running safely and collecting passengers by judicious switching of points. It begins simply enough but stress levels soon reach Southern Rail franchise proportions.

SOUTHERN BELLE

1985

■ Usually cited as the first 3D steam train simulator, a sadly neglected genre in the modern era, this casts you as the driver and fireman of an engine on route from London over to Brighton. HS2 this certainly isn't, but we do enjoy the strangely hypnotic demo mode.



"I ACTUALLY THINK THE MUSIC WAS A BIG REASON FOR THE GAME'S SUCCESS"

Tony Crowther

Such was the underhanded world of those early days of the British software industry but Tony remained fond of his steam-powered shooter and decided to revisit the train theme later that year. For Gremlin, he produced *Suicide Express*, a super-fast, futuristic take on *Loco*, and then for Quicksilva, he coded *Black Thunder*, a super-fast, futuristic take on *Loco*. Hang on, Tony, what happened there? "I was leaving Gremlin and found out I wasn't going to get a penny for all my work on *Suicide Express*," he explains. "We were trying to work out how we could make some money out of it and our solicitor said maybe we could change the graphics and the name."

It's an intriguing story and one we will share in a future issue of **Retro Gamer** but for now, we boot up *Loco* on the C64 Mini we've brought into Sumo HQ and soon Tony is clutching the joystick and trying to get to grips with his old game. It's fascinating to watch his eyes flick between the track overview at the bottom of the screen, planning his route and watching for approaching enemies, then up to the ever-decreasing fuel gauge at the top before focussing on the immediate threats to his engine in the middle of the screen from the bombs raining down from the flotilla of antagonistic aircraft. He dies frequently, mainly due to his inability to perfect the 'three smoke puffs' defensive shield manoeuvre necessary to survive an airborne onslaught.

"Look, I've not played this since, well, since I finished writing it," he says. "I would have played it a few times at the magazines the following month and then that would've been it. I was on to the next game. Hang on, what killed me there?"

We point out the explosive handcart that came from nowhere and Tony grumbles but presses restart instantly. After five minutes, he is definitely getting into the zone, dispatching foes with well-timed smoke bursts and switching lines at junctions with confidence, and we are reminded what an engrossing if brutally difficult game *Loco* is. "I need to concentrate 100 per cent. There are three different things to keep an eye on. I'll need some time to master this." His engine is blown apart by an airship and he pauses before adding, "I don't think I've got that much time." ✱

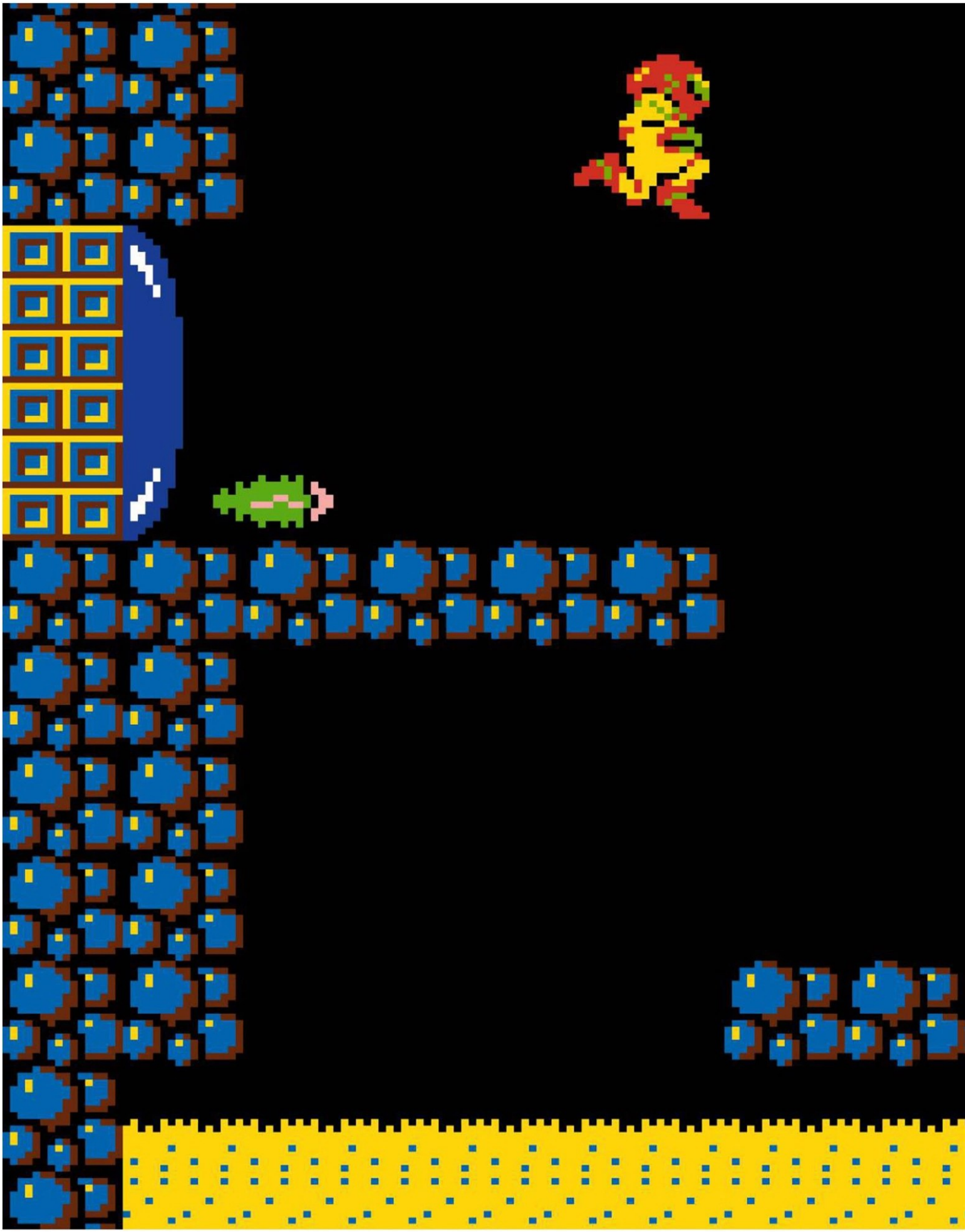
» [C64] Later levels are truly brutal – kudos if you make it to the fifth level.

CONVERSION CAPERS

Loco changes station

By 1984, Tony was becoming a 'face' on the C64 scene, his prolific output and the quality of his games meaning he was often featured in the game magazines of the day. "I'd buy all the mags every month and cut out any pages with my stuff on and throw the rest away," he admits. "I was always dead chuffed [to be in them] and I kept all the cuttings all in a scrapbook which I've still got." Though Tony's name was synonymous with the C64, *Loco* was also released on the Spectrum and Atari 8-bit computers in 1986. Did he have any involvement? "I didn't even know they existed!" he laughs. "I've never seen them running. They couldn't have had my code because it was written on a one line assembly so they must have just seen my game and done their own version." Which is apt, given how the game came about in the first place.

Thanks to Tony and Sumo Digital for their hospitality and Martyn Carroll and Frank Gaskin for additional help.



Metroid

PROPER PRONOUNS, PLEASE

» NES » 1986 » NINTENDO

I love the instruction manuals that come with NES games, because they're often a source of real weirdness. You don't really get this sort of thing anymore, because the games industry is a huge, global thing. There are 'brand bibles' and guidelines to make sure everyone is on message, and even if something did get changed, the internet would pounce on it within 15 seconds of the game's launch and there would be a huge argument about localisation (with some people erroneously calling it 'censorship'). But things were different back in the Eighties – if something was culturally unfamiliar, and things often were due to the Japanese origins of so many NES games, you could just rewrite the story and your audience would be none the wiser.

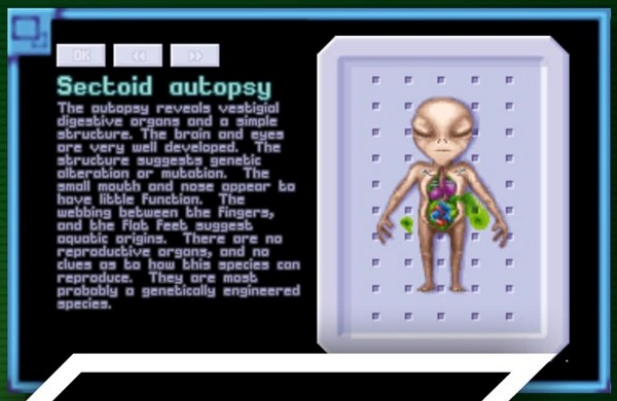
More often than not, I get the feeling that the people writing the manuals had pretty limited familiarity with the games they were writing about, too. If you need an example, *Metroid* is one of my favourites. Quite a lot of the story is actually related accurately when compared to the original story, but when we get to the subject of Samus, the manual gets things somewhat wrong. "He is the greatest of all the space hunters," it tells us. "He is a cyborg: his entire body has been surgically strengthened with robotics, giving him superpowers." This doesn't sound quite like the Samus we know, does it?

Of course, if you beat it quickly enough, the big secret revealed at the end of *Metroid* is that – *whisper it* – Samus is a woman. Now, you could argue that the manual's author was trying to save the surprise. But would it really surprise you if that person had just read the Japanese manual, which doesn't specify Samus' gender, and just made the assumption that the hero was a dude? Nintendo Of America wasn't the massive entity that it is today, so there's every chance that nobody there had cleared the game in under five hours to know the truth. *

» [PC] You might not want to get attached to your soldiers… they're likely going to meet an untimely end.

X·C

» [PC] The *X-COM* series pits your team of soldiers against an extraterrestrial menace.



» [PC] You can perform autopsies on alien corpses to better understand your enemy.

» [PC] The original alien designs were made by Microprose's John Reitze.

X-COM

As Julian Gollop gears up to release a spiritual successor to the series he created, he shares his memories of the origin of X-COM, as well as the many ups and downs the franchise has been through along the way

Words by Lewis Packwood

» [PC] Inspired by *Alien Liaison*, X-COM turned the aliens' technology against them.

***UFO: Enemy Unknown*, or *X-COM: UFO Defense* as it was known in the United States, started off as a sequel to *Laser Squad*, Julian Gollop's 1988 ZX Spectrum game.** "I had a story set where corporations rule the world, and you acted almost like a mercenary force for these different corporations," says Julian. It was primarily focused on MarsSec, the Mars Security Corporation, and Julian and his team at Mythos Games took an Atari ST demo of *Laser Squad II* to MicroProse UK in 1991. But the publisher felt it wasn't quite right.

"What they wanted was a game that could compete with *Civilization*," recalls Julian. He surmises that MicroProse UK, a subsidiary of the US company, suffered from "a bit of an inferiority complex because they were regarded as the 'toy division'. They were doing a lot of conversions, and they want to do something more serious". MicroProse US had released *Civilization* in 1991 to

IN THE STYLE OF... Five games that were inspired by X-COM

DIABLO

1996

■ "They copied the isometric perspective of dimensions from *X-COM* when they were making the original *Diablo*," says Julian. "Actually the first version of *Diablo* was turn-based. It was Blizzard that persuaded [Condor Games] to change it."

INCUBATION: TIME IS RUNNING OUT

1997

■ The creators of *The Settlers* and *Battle Isle* also made this *X-COM*-alike in 1997, one of the first strategy games to use 3D graphics. It fared well critically, but didn't perform well sales-wise.

UFO: AFTERMATH

2003

■ ALTAR bought the unfinished game *The Dreamland Chronicles: Freedom Ridge* from Julian's Mythos Games and turned it into this homage. It was followed by two sequels, *UFO: Aftershock* and *UFO: Afterlight*.

XENONAUTS

2014

■ This is a love letter to the original *X-COM* created by fans of the series. *PC Gamer* called it a "deeply engaging, indie version of an alien invasion that stands toe-to-toe with *X-COM*". Goldhawk is currently working on a sequel.

» [PC] Intercepting UFOs can be a tense affair.

» [PC] The game is split into two sections: your typical skirmishes with aliens and the Geoscape where you plan big picture stuff.

huge acclaim, and the UK office wanted its own slice of the pie. And it pushed Mythos to focus their game on an alien invasion.

"Both [assistant publisher] Pete Moreland and [game designer] Steven Hand at MicroProse were big fans of Gerry Anderson's *UFO* series," says Julian. "They said 'let's make it like Gerry Anderson's *UFO*', so I went back and started to do some research. I bought a few video cassettes from the series, and the thing about it that struck me was they had this idea of the aliens infiltrating planet Earth, and you had these three levels of defence. So the first level of defence was these Moon-based interceptors, and then the second-level defence was these airborne interceptors in Earth's atmosphere, and the third-level defence was these ground-based interceptors. So they try to intercept these flying saucers, but inevitably of course they always failed.

"I then went on to research contemporary UFO folklore, for want of a better word, and one particular book which was very influential for me was this book by Timothy Good, *Alien Liaison*. It had the idea that the government, the USA and potentially other governments, have somehow acquired or possibly captured some alien technology, including their flying saucers, and were trying to reverse engineer it. They'd also somehow captured some live alien 'greys' and were trying to interrogate them.

"All this stuff went into the game," continues Julian, apart from one particular aspect of Gerry Anderson's series. "We stripped out the Moon-based interception, because that's just stupid. You'd think the aliens would be intelligent enough to attack when the Moon is actually on the other side of the Earth." But the first and second levels of defence remained in the form of Interceptors and the Skyranger troop transports, and Gerry Anderson's idea of a secret agency dedicated to fighting the invaders – Shadow – became X-COM in the game.

Once the idea of X-COM was settled on, Julian was left with the task of dreaming up a backstory for it. "I had to think, 'Why does this organisation exist? Who's funding it and why?' The logical step was it was funded by the largest countries in the world and it's almost like a United Nations-style organisation but it's completely secret. And if you don't perform according to the way these countries expect you to do, then they get upset and stop funding you."

Which leads us to the game's curious duel names. So is it *UFO* or *X-COM*? "The game was always originally just called *UFO*," notes Julian. "MicroProse UK decided to add the tagline *Enemy Unknown* because *UFO* by itself is a bit nondescript and could be confused with Gerry Anderson's *UFO*. It was American MicroProse that decided to rename it *X-COM: UFO Defense*. I don't know why, but that's what they decided."

MUTANT YEAR ZERO: ROAD TO EDEN

THE BEARDED LADIES, 2018

■ This is one of a clutch of games inspired by the *XCOM* reboots. *Mutant Year Zero* blends turn-based tactics with real-time exploration, all set on an Earth overrun with mutants.

» [PC] Keep your soldiers equipped with good gear, or they'll be soon be outgunned by their alien foes.

> **"I was really interested in making turn-based games feel more interactive"**
> Julian Gollop

Whatever the reason, the name stuck, and *UFO* was dropped in favour of *X-COM* for the subsequent sequels. But in some ways it's a miracle that even the first game made it out, considering the puzzled reception it got when Julian went back to MicroProse to pitch it.

"I had to explain to them how the game works, and you have to appreciate how difficult it was because I couldn't really reference any other game – because there was no other game like it." Julian's idea was a real-time 'Geoscape' section of the game where the player shot down attacking UFOs and built a base, coupled with a turn-based 'Battlescape' mode where the player fought the aliens on the ground. It was quite unlike anything else at the time – and quite a distance from MicroProse UK's request for a *Civilization*-alike.

"They wanted something like *Civilization*, so we had some things from *Civilization* for sure," remembers Julian. "We had this idea of research, and that this research sort of drove your progression. And there was the idea of the UFOpedia, like a repository of knowledge that you've researched. But that was about it, there wasn't really any other connection." Still, even though they took some convincing, MicroProse gave *UFO: Enemy Unknown* the greenlight.

Julian reckons that board games were a massive influence on the development of *UFO/X-COM*. "I came from tabletop gaming, and particularly games from SPI and Avalon Hill like *Squad Leader* and *Sniper*. *Squad Leader* was just a fantastic game; *Sniper* from SPI was not such a good game, but was probably more influential in the development of *X-COM* than anything else. I'd probably say that particular board game is the most influential of my career. It had this concept of overwatch – or opportunity fire as they called it and I call it up to the present day." The idea of snapshots, meanwhile, came from a 1979 Game Designers' Workshop game called, appropriately enough, *Snapshot*.

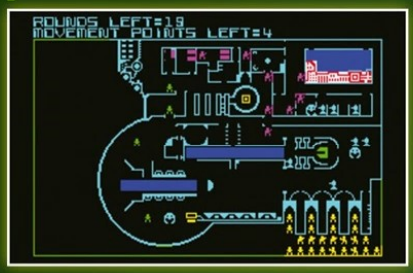
Julian wanted to capture the tactical fidelity of *Sniper* but without all the fiddly setting up and rule checking. "*Sniper* was a pain in the butt to play," he admits, "and my motivation was that the computer can actually manage all the painful stuff that players had to do on pen and paper and make for a smoother experience." And computers also allowed for more back and forth between opponents, he notes: "I guess I was really interested in making turn-based games feel more interactive, in the sense of the interaction between the characters during the enemy's and your turn - so it's not like chess, basically."

Still, when it came to actually developing the game, coding was an uphill battle. The unique combination of creating not only real-time but also turn-based sections meant Mythos had a big challenge ahead. "It was a real pain in the butt," Julian admits. "We started with the tactical combat system, because we thought that would be the most difficult one technically to implement." The *Laser Squad II* demo gave them a bit of a headstart on this, since they'd already created things like the isometric graphics and overwatch. "The things we added were the lighting system, which we wanted to use to represent battles that took place during day and night, and the procedurally generated battle environment system. We created these little map parcels of 10x10

» [PC] You base soon grows to accommodate all sorts of alien-fighting facilities.

GOLLOP'S GENIUS

A few highlights from Julian Gollop's illustrious portfolio



REBELSTAR RAIDERS

1984

■ This two-player sci-fi turn-based tactics game was developed by Julian for the Spectrum in 1984, while its sequels, *Rebelstar* and *Rebelstar II*, introduced a single-player mode and opportunity fire. Gollop returned to the series in 2005, making the Game Boy Advance exclusive *Rebelstar: Tactical Command*, published by Namco.

» Julian Gollop has had a very long and successful career surrounding strategy games.

LASER SQUAD

1988

■ *Laser Squad* debuted on the ZX Spectrum in 1988, and was later converted to the Commodore 64, Amstrad CPC, PC, Amiga and Atari ST in the years that followed. It built on the turn-based tactics of the *Rebelstar* series with several different scenarios and was rapturously received, earning 93% from *Amiga Format* and 97% from *CVG*.

MAGIC AND MAYHEM

1998

■ This title, published in 1998 by Virgin Interactive, was intended as a sort of continuation of Julian's 1985 ZX Spectrum game *Chaos: The Battle Of Wizards*. Although this time around *Magic And Mayhem* adopted real-time strategy design rather than turn-based. Interestingly, its cutscenes uses claymation models and Harryhausen-style stop motion.

GHOST RECON: SHADOW WARS

2011

■ This launch title for the Nintendo 3DS in 2011 was the highlight of the system's initial line-up – and if you ask certain members of the **RG** team, the best game on the 3DS full stop. The squad combat was slightly simplified from the *X-COM* games of old, but perfectly suited to the handheld.

CHAOS REBORN

2014

■ Julian took to Kickstarter in 2014 to raise funds for a remake of *Chaos*. The campaign managed to raise a commendable $210,854 before being released the following year. *Chaos Reborn* stays true to the turn-based wizard battles of the original, but with added equipment, spells and other enhancements.

tiles, and they'd be randomly put together based on the environment type.

"We knew this would be the trickiest thing to do," recalls Julian, "and it was difficult. The contract we had with MicroProse was for 18 months, and the idea was that we sort of split the divide between the tactical and Geoscape side on a two-to-one basis."

Julian and his team were concerned that their plans for the Geoscape mode could take considerable time because it involved a detailed 3D representation of Earth that was programmed by Julian's brother, Nick. "As far as we know, it's the first representation of the Earth in 3D with a day/night cycle that's ever been done," says Julian. "We didn't have 3D engines or 3D cards then, it was all software-based rendering techniques."

Thankfully, the nifty spinning globe that *X-COM* became famous for wasn't quite the time sink that Julian anticipated. "It didn't actually take us too long to do that, even though it was really innovative for the time. Then we focused on how to build all the other systems, the UFO interceptors, the base building, the base construction, the research." Julian notes that they spent so long working on the game's complicated systems that the weapons and aliens were only added in right at the end of development – and with some help from MicroProse.

MicroProse was able to help with the alien designs. "They asked the artist John Reitze to come up with a bunch of concepts," says Julian. "He actually came up with quite a lot of stuff. I visited the MicroProse offices in Chipping Sodbury and we looked at these screens of sprites that he designed, which all looked really fantastic.

"I was trying to think of what these creatures do in the game – you know, what makes them interesting. One of them was the floater type thing, a cyborg that flies. Another was the Chrysalid, this sort of crab-like, insect-looking thing – that kind of reminded of the alien from the *Alien* film, so I got the idea that it would impregnate your soldiers."

After being inspired by John's drawings, Julian came up with the concept of terror units – bigger, scarier companions to the more regular aliens – and asked John to sketch out what became things like the terrifying Cyberdisk and Sectopod. "We actually got more aliens in the game than I originally hoped for," he says.

UFO: Enemy Unknown launched in 1994 for Amiga and PC, and was later ported to the Amiga

» (PC) *Terror From The Deep* took the action underwater, and X-COM's new technology and gear reflected that.

» [PC] Threats in *Terror From The Deep* conjure up images of a certain Lovecraftian terror.

» [PC] Julian Gollop says that one of the hardest challenges in coding *X-COM: Apocalypse* was getting the traffic to behave correctly.

CD32 and PlayStation. It received almost universal acclaim, garnering a 9/10 score in *Amiga Format* and selling more than 600,000 units on PC alone – with around half of those sales in the US.

The success of *X-COM* convinced MicroProse to greenlight a sequel, *X-COM: Terror From The Deep*, although this time Mythos Games wasn't on developing duties. "We licenced the code to MicroProse," says Julian. "They rebuilt the game using new assets and new story stuff very much based on the original code base. We had nothing to do with it basically." Instead, Julian and his team set to on what would become the third game in the *X-COM* series, *X-COM: Apocalypse*.

Terror From The Deep was set 40 years after the first game, when a strange signal awakens aliens that have lain dormant in the oceans for millennia. *X-COM* is reformed to take on the threat, and the game involves building underwater bases and fighting the soggy aliens on their home turf. It climaxes in a catastrophic ending that sets up the events of the third game.

> **"When you save the game, it forgot to actually save the difficulty level you selected"**
> Julian Gollop

Players had complained that the first game was too easy, so MicroProse ramped up the difficulty for the sequel. But then players complained that *Terror From The Deep* was far too hard. What was going on? It turns out it was all down to a bug in the original *X-COM* that set the difficulty to beginner no matter what difficulty level you selected, says Julian. "When you save the game, it forgot to actually save the difficulty level you selected, so that when you reloaded the game, it always reset to the default, which I think was the easiest level."

Neither Mythos nor MicroProse's QA team had spotted the bug before release, mostly because the game was designed to get harder if players were doing well. "We had a sort of a dynamic difficulty adjustment system in the game," says Julian, "and the way it worked was that if you gave the aliens a thrashing, it would provoke them to progress a bit faster along their progression track. We put that in because we realised that there's no way that we can balance such a systemic game with all these interactions going on perfectly."

He says that this dynamic difficulty system ended up masking the save-game bug, meaning that the testers didn't notice until it was too late. "So we just didn't catch the bug. Looking back on it, we probably accidentally did the best thing – the game did kind of adjust to however good you actually were, regardless of the actual difficulty level you selected."

While MicroProse was busy re-skinning the first *X-COM* game to make *Terror From The Deep*, Julian and Mythos Games were working on something altogether more ambitious. Set 50 years after the apocalyptic ending to *Terror From The Deep*, in the third game humanity lives in giant self-contained cities. "I guess the underlying influence comes from *Judge Dredd*," says Julian. "*Judge Dredd* had Mega-City One: basically, most of the Earth was a wasteland apart from a few mega cities."

X-COM: Apocalypse tasked the player with defending just one city – Mega-Primus – rather

» [PC] Mythos Games was disappointed with the 'blobby' appearance of in-game characters in *X-COM: Apocalypse*.

FROM THE ASHES

How Julian is returning to the X-COM formula with Phoenix Point

Julian Gollop has been beavering away on *Phoenix Point* for the past few years, which is billed as a spiritual successor to the *X-COM* games of old. And it's been a chance for Gollop to revive an array of dormant concepts. "It involves quite a lot of ideas and influences from *X-COM: Apocalypse*, the original *X-COM* and also *Dreamland Chronicles*, which was a cancelled project I was working on," he says. "I view it very much as a continuation of what I was doing back in the Nineties."

Similar to *Dreamland*, humanity is on the back foot as Lovecraftian horrors have taken over the planet, and it's up to the player to stage a resistance. Superficially it bears a resemblance to 2K's *XCOM* reboots, but there are some significant differences, such as the first-person aiming that allows body parts to be targeted. And rather than shots being calculated with a percentage – which can sometimes result in misses from point blank range – you instead have a disc in your sights that you aim over the enemy. All shots will land within that disc, so if it's completely covering an enemy, you're guaranteed a hit.

But the real innovation comes with the enemies themselves, which evolve in response to your actions. They feature modular body parts with different mutations – so, for example, a crab-like creature might have a claw that's mutated into a shield. And if that mutation proves effective for the enemy, they will send more enemies with the same mutation into battle.

Balancing all of these mutations has been a headache for the team at Snapshot Games, says Julian. "I think for the most complex creature, we've got something like 600 possible unique combinations." But after a couple of delays, the game is almost ready for release – it's currently slated for September 2019.

» [PC] In *Phoenix Point* you can target specific body parts and sometimes even guarantee a hit.

» [PC] The creature design in Julian's new *X-COM* successor is impressive.

» [PC] *X-COM: Interceptor* ditched the turn-based combat in favour of real-time space battles.

than the whole Earth, but it was far more complicated because of the various organisations within the city you had to keep on side. "It was the idea that these mega cities were a horrendous parody of existing big cities," says Julian, "where you've got multiple factions, gangs, corporations, all vying for influence and control, and stuff is fairly corrupt."

This time around, the aliens are interdimensional beings that warp directly into your city. "But at the same time," says Julian, "you've got to be aware that there are all these other organisations in the city that you need to keep happy." The corporations will react to things like collateral damage to the city, and they might even be infiltrated by the aliens themselves.

If that wasn't complicated enough, the game was now all played in real time (although there was still an option to switch to turn-based fights). Julian recalls that developing such a sophisticated real-time game was a headache: "We had to do a real-time-based AI, and we had to deal with all the animation and timing issues that real-time games have to deal with. It was very tricky."

Development ended up taking around two and a half years, and it was marked by disagreements with MicroProse about the look of the game. "MicroProse didn't quite get the hang of the graphics," says Julian. "They took all the graphics in-house: they had a much bigger art team, and they did some really good designs with these sorts of retrofuturistic vehicles and stuff." But the team wanted to use 3D graphics tools to create the assets, and Julian was less than impressed with the results. "They had this overambitious idea. This famous sci-fi artist who did lots of book covers was going to build these really sophisticated aliens in plasticine and they were going to 3D scan them and then render them. And they ended up looking like these blobby characters. I looked at the plasticine models they used, and they've got some amazing detail on them, which they just couldn't replicate in the game."

And although Julian was unhappy with the graphics, there was nothing he could do. "I had absolutely no control over their art department. They had this amazing ambition to do some amazingly brilliant stuff, which ended up looking like Mr Blobby."

X-COM: Apocalypse marked the end of Julian's involvement in the *X-COM* franchise, although Mythos Games would go on to start development of a spiritual successor to the series in the form of *The Dreamland Chronicles: Freedom Ridge*. This game saw Earth being conquered by dinosaur-like aliens, but Mythos struggled to find a publisher, and development was wound up, along with Mythos Games itself, in 2001.

However, *Dreamland* lives on in a fashion in *Phoenix Point*, the latest game from Gollop's new studio, Snapshot Games. "Some ideas from that are actually in *Phoenix Point*," he says, "including body part targeting and the first-person aiming system. That was actually in *Dreamland* back in 2000. And also the Geoscape side of the original *Dreamland* is somewhat similar in some ways to *Phoenix Point*: the idea that the aliens are already building these big structures, and that you have to scavenge for really basic stuff."

While Mythos Games worked on the ill-fated *Dreamland Chronicles*, MicroProse carried on making games in the *X-COM* series, although they began to stray farther and farther from the turn-based original. *X-COM: Interceptor* from 1998, which is actually set before *Apocalypse* in the timeline, saw the fight being taken into space, as Earth's corporations seek to find new resources in distant star systems to rebuild the shattered Earth. It was a mix of base management and real-time

> **"They had this ambition to do some brilliant stuff, which ended up looking like Mr Blobby"**
> Julian Gollop

flight simulation – the player would repel alien attacks by hopping into a spaceship and shooting down the marauding forces.

Although it was mostly well received, scoring an 8/10 in *Edge*, the game sold poorly and shared little DNA with the previous *X-COM* games. "*X-COM Interceptor* was a tangent really, rather than the continuation of the series," notes Julian.

At about the same time, the struggling MicroProse was bought out by Hasbro Interactive, and two of its development studios were closed shortly afterwards. MicroProse itself would cease to exist as a company in 2001, when Hasbro sold its remaining intellectual property to Infogrames.

Hasbro released two further titles in the *X-COM* series. *X-COM: First Alien Invasion* from 1999 was a budget title that formed part of Hasbro's 'Email Games' range – this simplified version of *X-COM* could only be played over email, and ceased to be playable once Hasbro shut down the servers. *X-COM: Enforcer* from 2001, meanwhile, dropped the strategy element of *X-COM*, instead offering up a third-person shooter where the player controls a robot 'enforcer' taking out invading aliens. It was critically mauled by *PC Gamer* on release, whose review called it "one of the worst spin-offs ever squirted out on the PC".

Enforcer was built from the ashes of two cancelled games, *X-COM: Genesis* and *X-COM: Alliance*. *Genesis* was an attempt to do a "back to the roots style *X-COM* game" but with a 3D engine, notes Julian. It was helmed by Dave Ellis' team at MicroProse Chapel Hill, which had worked on *Interceptor*, and was scheduled for launch in 2001. But Hasbro cancelled the game at the end of 1999 and closed the studio shortly afterwards.

X-COM: Alliance, on the other hand, started development at MicroProse UK's studio all the way back in 1996 and used gameplay similar to *Hired Guns* on the Amiga, with play split between four windows reflecting the viewpoints of each of your troops. But Hasbro closed the British office in 1999 and switched development to the US. Shortly afterwards, the project was put on hold and the assets were used to make *X-COM: Enforcer*, a much simpler game. *X-COM: Alliance* flickered back into life briefly at Infogrames in 2001, but ultimately was permanently cancelled in 2002.

Julian remembers seeing *Alliance* on display at a huge booth during E3 1999. "I went up to try it, and there was a MicroProse guy there who jumped on me because there wasn't anybody else playing. And he said, 'Are you familiar with *X-COM*?' and I said, 'Yeah, just a little bit.'

"It was interesting, in the sense that it was a squad-based first-person shooter type thing where you control four soldiers, and each of the soldiers had their own view in a separate camera. But it wasn't working well – I remember I played it for two minutes and my guy started standing at a really weird angle of about 60 degrees from vertical. You couldn't really play it."

Julian laments the sad fate of the original *X-COM* series: "It went out with a whimper, basically." But now, with 2K's *XCOM* reboots and a spiritual successor in the form of *Phoenix Point*, finally the series has a legacy to be proud of. ✱

» [PC] *X-COM: Enforcer* ditched all tactical elements and was instead a straight-up third-person shooter.

TURNING X-COM INTO XCOM

How Firaxis and 2K revitalised the series

XCOM: ENEMY UNKNOWN

2012

■ Firaxis revived the beleaguered *X-COM* brand in 2012 with this well-received reboot – which dropped the hyphen and combined the names *X-COM: UFO Defense* and *UFO: Enemy Unknown*. It stayed true to the turn-based original, but refined and updated many of its systems.

THE BUREAU: XCOM DECLASSIFIED

2013

■ This third-person shooter languished in development hell before limping out in 2013. Chiefly made by the 2K Marin studio, the game was intended to chart the formation of XCOM in the Sixties, at the height of the Cold War.

XCOM: ENEMY WITHIN

2013

■ This update of *Enemy Unknown* was launched in 2013, and features several additions and improvements to the original game, including cyborg soldiers, base defence missions and an enemy faction called EXALT – a human organisation that has sided with the aliens.

XCOM 2

2016

■ Firaxis released this sequel in 2016, with the twist that *XCOM* lost the alien war in the first game. In a similar way to Julian Gollop's cancelled *Dreamland Chronicles*, aliens now control the Earth and players lead a resistance in an attempt to topple their dominion. More bespoke level design and mission variety made this a winner.

XCOM 2: WAR OF THE CHOSEN

2017

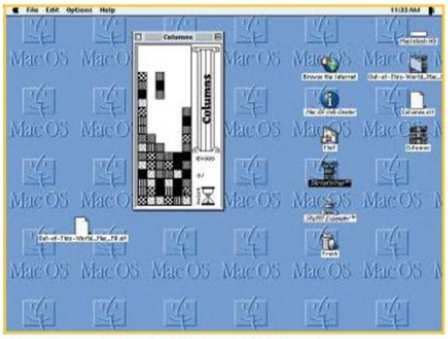
■ This expansion overhauls the game's campaign, introducing new rebel factions as well as three powerful, recurring enemies known as The Chosen. It also adds a neutral faction called The Lost, zombies which will attack humans and aliens alike.

THE MAKING OF COLUMNS

SEGA'S ANSWER TO TETRIS PROVED TO BE A GOOD ALTERNATIVE ON THE PLATFORMS IT LANDED ON, BUT IT ALMOST DIDN'T MAKE IT TO MARKET. WE TALK TO ITS ORIGINAL CREATOR, JAY GEERTSEN, TO LEARN MORE

Words by Adam Barnes

Everyone has a retro title that meant the world to them. For some it may be the game they played the most throughout a machine's life, for others it may be the one they could only play over the weekend after renting it from the video rental place down the road. When it comes to Sega's Mega Drive, those games could be anything from *Sonic* and *Streets Of Rage* through to *Earthworm Jim* or *Road Rash*. Few games, however, have the complete, unanimous recognition of *Columns*, a game that every Mega Drive owner must've whiled away the hours on at one point or another. This is thanks in large part to the *Mega Games 1* bundle – which came packed with *Super Hang-On* and *World Cup Italia '90* – and is arguably the reason that the *Tetris* clone became such a staple of the console.



» [Mac] One of Jay's friends at HP converted his X11 version of *Columns* to the Mac, while another created the DOS version.

IN THE KNOW

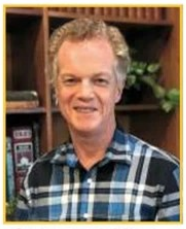
» **PUBLISHER:** Sega

» **DEVELOPER:** Sega, Jay Geertsen

» **RELEASED:** 1989

» **PLATFORM:** Various

» **GENRE:** Puzzle



» *Columns* started off life as a side project for Jay Geertson

But while the obvious comparison with Nintendo's puzzler is there, the story of *Columns* is rather surprising, forgoing the typical tales of developer endurance or a determination to do something new with videogaming. In fact, *Columns* wasn't even going to be released at all.

"Around 1989, my family and I were living in Colorado Springs where I was working for Hewlett-Packard as a software engineer," says Jay Geertsen, the brain behind the jewel-matching game. "The team I was on was developing a graphical application and I was given the assignment to port the application to the X11 Window System. I had found an X11 tutorial online and was plodding through it, but before long I became a bit bored with the exercises in the tutorial. I thought that programming a simple real-time game would be more interesting and fun." Believe it or not, but that's where the story of *Columns* begins, not with a desire to release an interesting product onto the games market, but rather as a way of practicing programming for a software engineer. "I don't recall going through a long thought process about the initial concept." says Jay, who admits that he just wanted to "transition from the X11 tutorial to a game". From this came the concept of manipulating falling tiles into three or more rows. "Soon after that, I decided to use colours for the tiles and that aligning colours would be the objective."

It'd be easy to make the *Tetris* comparison, of course. But while the landmark puzzler released in 1984 on various platforms, it wasn't actually until

» [Arcade] Nothing felt more satisfying than having the Game Over sign explode onto your opponent's screen during a tense battle.

"AT THE TIME MY INTENT WAS SIMPLY TO GAIN SOME EXPERIENCE PROGRAMMING WITH X11"

Jay Geertsen

the same year that Jay started on the concept of *Columns* that *Tetris* was released and it became the smash hit we know it is today. While Jay was aware of the game, however, he wasn't really looking at videogames for inspiration. "Distinguishing the game from *Tetris* was never really a goal," says Jay. "I mean, I wasn't trying to mimic *Tetris*, but I never consciously thought, 'Because *Tetris* does *that*, I'm going to do *this*.'" As it happens, the initial inspiration behind *Columns* was in fact Tic-Tac-Toe, he adds. "Back then I appreciated games with a relatively simple concept, and 'three things in a row' seemed like a simple concept." Jay adds that he wanted the premise to be simple because "at the time my intent was simply to gain some experience programming with X11" rather than to create a marketable game.

However, this doesn't mean that there was nothing of *Tetris* that had worked its way into *Columns*, or rather had worked its way *out*. "One thing I didn't like about *Tetris* was that the pieces dropped faster and faster as it was played until defeat was inevitable," recalls Jay. "I never myself implemented a similar speedup in *Columns*. I wanted people to feel like they could play forever if they were just good enough." His solution to allow for an increasing difficulty, then, was to instead alter the columns themselves. "Instead of the speedup, I implemented increasing levels of difficulty. At the easiest level, there were only three colours in play, and potentially all three of the tiles in a column could be the same colour. At

» [Arcade] The Mega Drive and arcade versions were practically identical, though the latter included modes like Duo.

the hardest level, all six colours were in play and available, and all three tiles in the column had to be distinct colours." It was a different approach to how *Tetris* handled its difficulty but Jay explains that it was "enough of an ultimate challenge for me". Though this would go on to be changed once the game left Jay's hands, a similar function appeared in some versions of *Columns* that allowed the player to pick how many jewels would appear, controlling the difficulty for themselves.

It's interesting that Jay had no grander vision for his game than merely to learn the intricacies of the HP-UX operating system. "I had no hopes for the game other than to learn X11 programming," he says, adding that "when I shared it within HP, I simply hoped that people would enjoy it. The thought of commercial potential never ▶

ESSENTIAL SEQUELS

Columns sequels worth taking the time to solve

COLUMNS II

■ Though the console version of *Columns* released in 1990, the arcade version had been around in Japan since 1989. This sequel – initially exclusive to both Japan and the arcades – released in August of 1990 with the subtitle of *The Voyage Through Time*. This didn't amount to much outside of a variety of backdrops from across the ages and jewel sprites to match.

COLUMNS III

■ Unlike its predecessor, the third game in the series did release in the west in 1993. This time it was released for both arcades and Mega Drive, though very little was done to adapt the gameplay beyond the foundation that was set in the original. This time an Egyptian setting had the player combat against AI in single-player as they delved deeper into a pyramid.

COLUMNS '97

■ So called because it was released in 1997 (shocking, right?), this arcade-only entry revamped the visuals to add a bit more jazz to the experience. It was, otherwise, exactly the same as others, but the way the jewels gently spun on the screen did at least give the game a little more flair. The cabinet ran for four years in Japan before it was discontinued.

SUPER COLUMNS

■ Considering the popularity of *Tetris* on Game Boy, it was naturally a smart move for Sega to bring the original game over onto Game Gear. However, *Super Columns* was the first game of the series to be made exclusively for a portable device, and added in a heap of new features: new types of blocks, different columns with special effects and even the ability to rotate the columns.

COLUMNS CROWN

■ Releasing in 2001 some years after its predecessor *Super Columns*, this Game Boy Advance release was a case of too little, too late for Sega and the *Columns* franchise. Despite being a decent version of the classic *Columns* gameplay, the GBA was already rife with similar puzzle titles and it was just hard for the classic Mega Drive brand to catch up.

CONQUER COLUMNS

How to build it up to knock it all down

C-C-C-COMBO

■ Since tiles will drop after clearing beneath them in *Columns*, the scoring system is built around the idea of building combos. This is your bread and butter in the game, so carefully planning ahead and building patterns that will easily lead to combo points is essential.

TWO-WAY

■ On top of planning and building combos ahead of time, maximising the points scored in a single drop is also crucial in *Columns*. This means you need to be mindful of placing columns in such a way that the right column setup will score two – or more – sets of three.

STACK OF THREE

■ While you'll be tempted to use the rare three-tile column to score a four or five-tile set, remember that it is much more valuable than that. You need to use it smartly rather than just throwing it away by building off it to allow for a high-scoring combo later on.

MAKE IT COUNT

■ The special flashing column is powerful, but while you'll likely score more points by landing on – and destroying all of – the jewel colour with the most on the screen, keep in mind that this useful tool can also help you clear away bothersome, hard-to-clear tiles, too.

ONE STEP AHEAD

■ As things start to stack up, you'll want to start picking away at the single colours sitting beneath other jewels. To do this you'll need to build a diagonal combo, so choose one to destroy and focus on getting rid of this. If you're methodical, you'll clear away some table space with little trouble.

DON'T PANIC

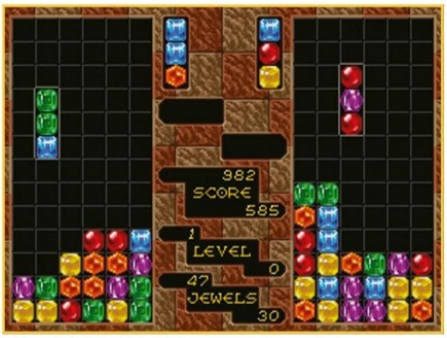
■ As with most of these games, when the speed picks up, and you've little real estate to work with, remember to plan smartly. Rather than slamming columns in the first suitable place you see, hold off and use the fall time to glance at what you're getting next and plan accordingly.

"I HAD NO INPUT INTO ANYTHING THAT SEGA DID"

Jay Geertsen

▶ crossed my mind." The game at this point wasn't quite the same as the one that would later make its way over to Sega's console. Though the core idea of sets of tiles dropping from the top of the screen was there, it only used colours to differentiate between tiles and had no speed-based difficulty. Nor was there any of the music that many would nowadays associate with the game. It had fulfilled its purpose of helping Jay to understand programming on the X11 version of the operating system, sharing the end result with fellow Hewlett-Packard employees. "I had a HP colleague in California who maintained a collection of HP-UX X11 apps and games and access to the collection was available to any employee in the company. After I created the game, I shared it with him and he posted it on his server." This was the beginning of how *Columns* would come to gain wider visibility, with internal developers eventually picking up on the tile-stacking puzzle game. "Two HP colleagues later contacted me and expressed an interest in porting the game. One wanted to port it to the Mac and the other wanted to port it to DOS. They, in turn, shared their versions of the game with the public, which I was okay with." These two ports were essentially identical to Jay's original, though he admits that "one of them did implement a speedup to the game" despite his original idea preferring to avoid such a feature. The Mac version naturally had to forgo the colourful blocks, and instead used different patterns to help distinguish the different tiles from one another.

Jay ultimately didn't pay much heed to the progress of the game at this point, since he had no aspirations for the game to go beyond his little work project. His task had been achieved and though the wider world could now have access to the title through shareware, it wasn't something that Jay was especially interested in. "I had no interest [in becoming a

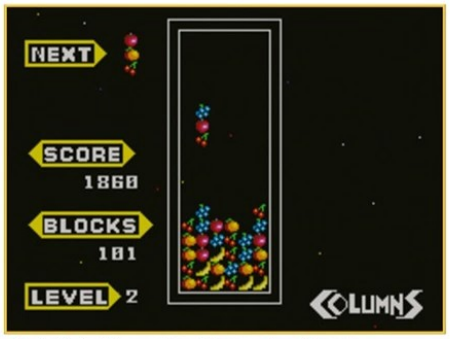


» [Mega Drive] The addition of a two-player mode was actually a huge advantage over the likes of *Tetris*.

» [Mega Drive] A novel Duo mode was added into the Mega Drive version, whereby players would take turns to drop columns.

game developer]," says Jay, "I was a pretty happy software developer and didn't want to take time away from my career or family."

But the game did manage to get some traction on DOS and Mac, and it was here that Sega – in a roundabout way – ended up getting involved. "A lawyer had learned about the game – presumably from having seen one of the two ports of it shared publicly – and tracked me down. The ported games gave me attribution as the originator." The lawyer was independent, but had seen the potential in the game and was looking to buy the rights to it. "I felt that because I had used corporate resources to create the game, I ought to let them know what was going on," explains Jay, who adds that as a result he ended up taking the request further up the chain to his management and their higher-ups. "They seemed a little unsure of how to proceed and it took them about six months to decide what to do. As it turned out, HP sold non-exclusive rights to the fellow. The money he paid for it was donated to the Mile High United Way. HP retained the rights to distribute my X11 version of the game with HP-UX." Admittedly this all seems a little anticlimactic for the game that *Columns* went on to become, though Jay at least acknowledges that he was awarded with a plaque by the X11 team within HP as praise for their contribution to their distribution. "I never intended to make a commercial endeavour of the game," adds Jay. "Even if I had wanted to, I still would have felt compelled to consult with my HP management due to having used my work computer to create the game."



» [Master System] Some versions of the game allowed players to change the appearance of the jewels.

» [Arcade] Competitive multiplayer is a huge draw in puzzle games like *Columns*.

Of course, the rest of the story comes down to Sega who, having lost its rights to publishing *Tetris* in the arcades, had set about looking for a puzzle game that could replace and maybe even compete with Nintendo's hugely successful title. Sega managed to find out about *Columns* and tracked down the lawyer, buying the rights through him and turning it into a marketable product that gamers might want to pay for. Initially this meant a release in arcades in 1989, but inevitably it came over to Mega Drive and Game Gear by 1990. The core gameplay remained, though the overlay of jewels – rather than coloured blocks – gave the title a little more pizazz. "I had no input into anything that Sega did with the game," says Jay of the process of the game officially releasing as a product. "They just ran with it as they chose. It was they who decided to replace the coloured column tiles with jewels and to invent the lore about the ancient Phoenicians."

There were other additions, too, such as a two-player mode or magic jewels that could destroy all the gems of the same colour. Sega also reinstated the quickening of columns as the game got harder. "It was kind of gratifying to see the Sega implementations and packaging," says Jay of witnessing his game turned into a fully realised product. "I thought the coloured jewels instead of just coloured squares was a good enhancement."

While he may not have meant for such popularity for his little work project, *Columns* went on to become a significant release for Sega, eventually leading to its own distinct breed of tile-based puzzling. It was a hit, unexpectedly so for Jay, but went on to become the de facto puzzle game for many Sega fans. "I took notice when the game started to appear in gaming stores," recalls Jay. "It did pump my ego a bit." Despite its familiarity, there continues to be a humbleness about its original creator, even all these years later. "On occasion I thought it would be fun to go into a gaming store and proclaim myself as the creator of the game," he admits, "but since I had no means of proving it, I figured it wouldn't be a worthwhile nor rewarding endeavour." ★

ULTIMATE GUIDE: Super Adventure Island™

Discover how a back-to-basics approach, the advanced graphical grunt of the Super Nintendo and a scintillating soundtrack by Yuzo Koshiro led to one of Master Higgins' most memorable adventures. It's time to journey back to Adventure Island

Words by Darran Jones

» [SNES] The more full the bar on the left is, the more points you'll score at an area's end.

» [SNES] Mode 7 isn't used very often in *Super Adventure Island*, but it's extremely effective when it is.

If we've learned one thing about Master Higgins over the years it's that he's certainly not the brightest of videogame heroes. Despite having to continuously rescue his girlfriend/wife across numerous games, he continues to live on Adventure Island. Fortunately, Master Higgins' inability to come to terms with just how dangerous his idyllic home is means that we've been able to enjoy many adventures over the past 30-odd years and one of our favourites remains his first entry on Nintendo's 16-bit console.

Hudson Soft's very first *Adventure Island* game was essentially an adaptation of Westone's *Wonder Boy*, but with a brand-new hero (along with bosses and music) who was based on an

» [SNES] Find the special star in each area and you'll unlock a special bonus round.

executive at Hudson Soft called Takahashi Meijin. Just as later Westone *Wonder Boy* games would dabble with new game mechanics and branch out into different genres, many of the later *Adventure Island* games would also be markedly different to Sega's popular 1986 arcade hit. The NES and Game Boy games, for example, feature cute dragons that Master Higgins can use as steeds, and it's possible to carry them across to later levels or stockpile them for later use in the game. These neat mechanics helped give the early *Adventure Island* games a nice distinctive vibe from the releases Westone was working on, ensuring they stood apart from the many other platformers that appeared on Nintendo's consoles. Interestingly, the first *Adventure Island* game to grace Nintendo's 16-bit console decided to once again mine the original *Wonder Boy* for inspiration, and as a result it's a very different beast to the sequels that appeared on the NES.

Despite the sheer raw power of the Super Nintendo compared to Nintendo's original 8-bit system, developer Produce! decided to keep things simple for its first and only entry in the *Adventure Island* series. Sure there are some snazzy Mode 7 effects and graphically things are a lot more impressive compared to the earlier NES games, but mechanically the series takes something of a step back. Levels are fairly linear affairs with only the odd chasm or moving platform to mix things up and challenge the player. Later stages do start adding the odd vertical level to add some variety but the core focus is typically based around completing a stage as quickly as possible, just like the arcade version of *Wonder Boy*. This focus on not dallying is further impressed on you by the visual representation of Master Higgins' energy, which is displayed on-screen and constantly ticks down, meaning you'll need to continually be on the lookout for fruit and milk in order to ensure your energy reserves remain high. It means, at the very least, that *Super Adventure Island* is a fast-paced romp through some very colourful environments.

» [SNES] *Super Adventure Island*'s stages may be cliched, but they look mighty impressive.

BOSS RUSH

How to topple Super Adventure Island's roster of mayors

BAMBOOZAL

■ Don't be fooled by this large statue as it spits out fire and is surrounded by annoying ghosts that just love to get in your way.

HOW TO BEAT IT

Leap over the walls of flame that rush towards you and smack Bamboozal in the head. You'll need to time your jumps, but you'll soon send him to his maker.

KRAKEN

■ This underwater monstrosity has tentacles that it likes to flick out at you. Take care to avoid his fishy friends that swim towards you at inopportune moments.

HOW TO BEAT IT

This is a lot easier with the axe weapon. Simply stick to the top-left of the screen and lob away with your axes. Routinely move to avoid the fish and Kraken should soon explode.

LAVASLITHER

■ We're not really too sure what animal coupling would result in this weird hybrid, but it does make for a useful moving platform. Ride Lavaslither to victory.

HOW TO BEAT IT

See Lavaslither's rather big noggin? Throw as many axes or boomerangs into it as you can. Be aware of the lava that falls down and make sure you don't accidentally jump off it.

KING REPTILIAN

■ This boss cuts an imposing figure and has a long reach. He'll also crumble when hit, but will reform, so don't be caught out.

HOW TO BEAT IT

Timing is key here. You'll need to jump up and strike his head, but you'll need to watch out for his sword. Take your time and he'll crumble one final time.

DARK CLOAK (PHASE 1)

■ This critter might look cute, but it's not to be messed with. Look out for the boulders it throws and be wary of its rush attack.

HOW TO BEAT IT

Dodge the three rocks it throws at you and then jump over Dark Cloak as he rushes towards you. He'll soon fall, but the fight to save Jeanie is only just beginning...

DARK CLOAK (PHASE 2)

■ The true form of Dark Cloak is a demon/pink elephant thing that is very hard to avoid due to its sheer colossal size.

HOW TO BEAT IT:

Stay under Dark Cloak whenever you can and goad him into slamming the same bits of loose floor. Get this just right and after a few slams he will fall into the lava.

MASTERING MASTER HIGGINS

How to make the most of Hudson Soft's hero

SKATEBOARD

■ Normally a collision with an enemy means instant death, but not when you're riding on a skateboard. Handily, it also greatly speeds you up when used.

JUMPING

■ Master Higgins can jump over most enemies in the game and can clear larger chasms if you press up while jumping.

SUPER JUMP

■ Sometimes you need a little more power than a standard jump and that's where the super jump comes in. Hold down and jump to activate it.

SWIMMING

■ You only swim on a couple of levels, but it remains a useful skill to learn. You're more sluggish while swimming, mind, so give enemies a wide berth.

AXE

■ This useful projectile arcs in a downward trajectory, so time your throws accordingly. Once it's powered up four times it shoots fireballs and can break open rocks.

BOOMERANG

■ This rather versatile weapon can be powered up just like the axe can. It's far more useful, though, as you can fire it both above and below you.

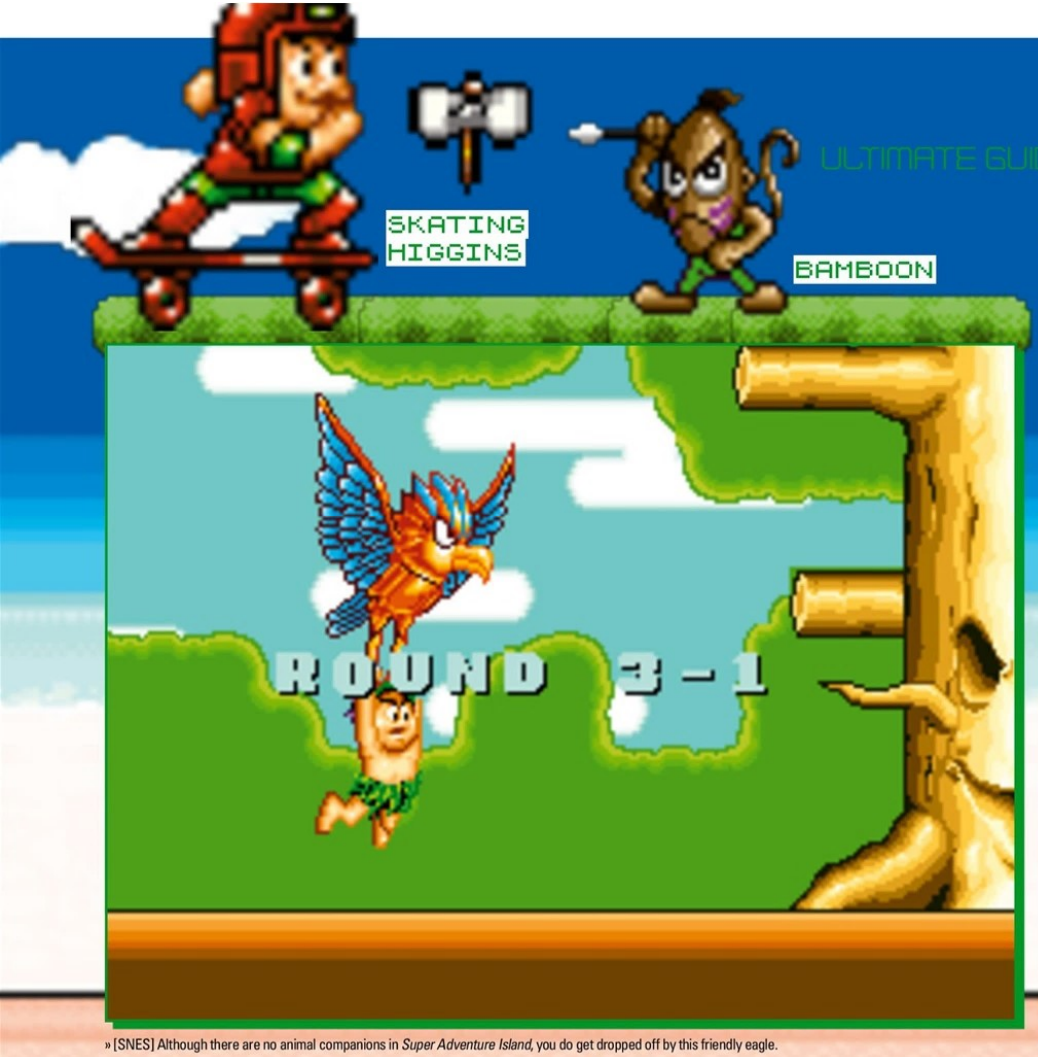
"IT'S ONE OF THE FEW SUPER NINTENDO GAMES THAT WON'T COST YOU A FORTUNE"

Adventure Island is crawling with enemies and Master Higgins typically starts off with no weapons, meaning he has to rely on his legs in order to propel him past the game's many hazards. Fortunately, Higgins is pretty handy when it comes to jumping and he can easily leap over most foes in the game. Crucially he can leap higher and further by pressing up on the d-pad while jumping, which becomes far more important in later stages where moving platforms and more deviously placed enemies start coming into play. Higgins can also now crouch, which not only enables him to avoid incoming enemies and projectiles, but also allows him to perform an even more impressive 'Super Jump' that again helps with avoiding enemies and has the added bonus of letting him reach out of the way fruit. Jumping will only get Higgins so far, however, so each course often features a number of power-ups in the form of axes and boomerangs for him to use. The axe is a throwback to both *Wonder Boy* and the earlier *Adventure Island* games, allowing Higgins to lob projectiles in a lazy arc that destroy any wayward enemies they come across. Even more useful is the boomerang, which can be thrown in various directions (including up and down) and has the additional benefit

BANANAS

MELON

PINEAPPLE



» [SNES] Although there are no animal companions in *Super Adventure Island*, you do get dropped off by this friendly eagle.

SUPER SEQUEL

The further SNES adventures of Master Higgins

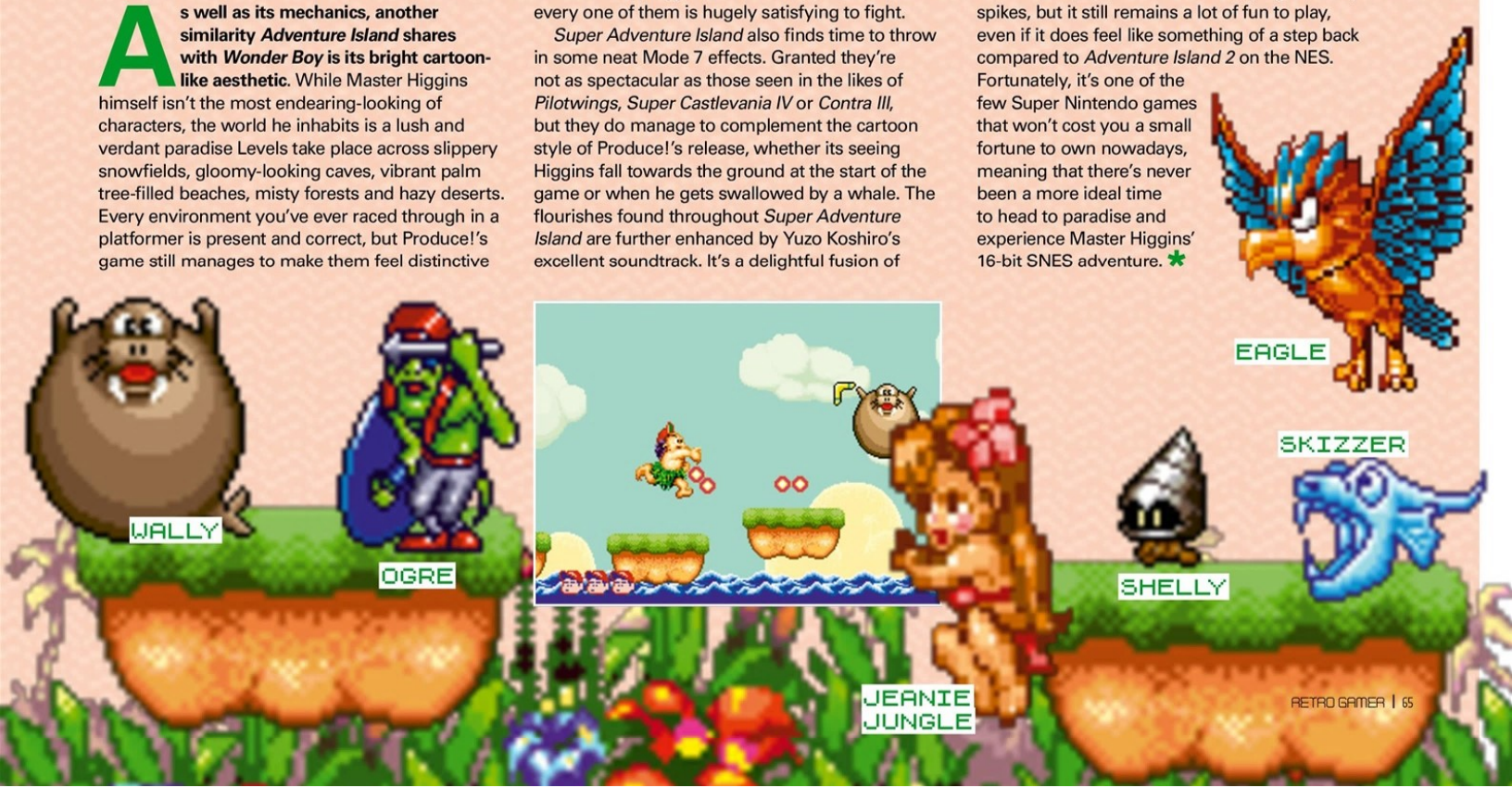
Two years after rescuing Jeanie Jungle, our plucky hero Master Higgins returned in a brand-new adventure. *Super Adventure Island II* is a far more ambitious game than the original, as it features a more in-depth story, a large overworld map, as well as plenty of additional items that Master Higgins can use. It also sports the same kind of light RPG elements that would also feature in Westone's later *Wonder Boy* games. Certain areas of the game world can only be reached with specific items, so there's a lovely *Metroid* vibe running through it as well. *Super Adventure Island II* is a lot easier than *Super Adventure Island*, and the new soundtrack is nowhere near as punchy, but this sequel remains a worthy alternative to the original and should certainly find its way into your collection.

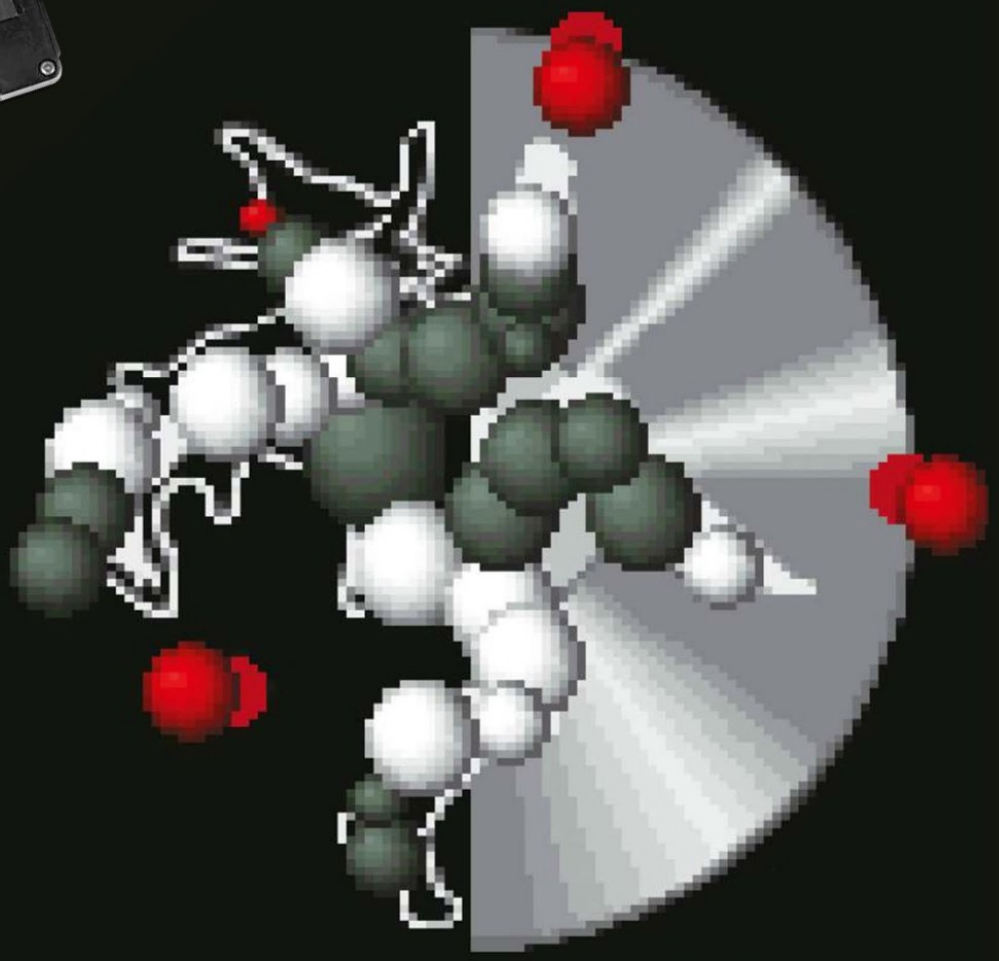
of potentially taking out any missed enemies as it returns to Higgins' eager hand. Both items can be powered up a total of four times and their final incarnations become fused with fire, which allows Higgins to break open the troublesome rocks that can be found on most stages.

As well as its mechanics, another similarity *Adventure Island* shares with *Wonder Boy* is its bright cartoon-like aesthetic. While Master Higgins himself isn't the most endearing-looking of characters, the world he inhabits is a lush and verdant paradise Levels take place across slippery snowfields, gloomy-looking caves, vibrant palm tree-filled beaches, misty forests and hazy deserts. Every environment you've ever raced through in a platformer is present and correct, but Produce!'s game still manages to make them feel distinctive thanks to *Super Adventure Island*'s bright and punchy visuals. This larger-than-life style extends to the game's bosses, which are often huge abominations that are as cute as they are deadly. A giant octopus, lava-protected snake and a huge guardian statue are just a few of the deadly creations that Higgins has to face and each and every one of them is hugely satisfying to fight.

Super Adventure Island also finds time to throw in some neat Mode 7 effects. Granted they're not as spectacular as those seen in the likes of *Pilotwings*, *Super Castlevania IV* or *Contra III*, but they do manage to complement the cartoon style of Produce!'s release, whether its seeing Higgins fall towards the ground at the start of the game or when he gets swallowed by a whale. The flourishes found throughout *Super Adventure Island* are further enhanced by Yuzo Koshiro's excellent soundtrack. It's a delightful fusion of tropical tunes and big bouncy beats that will be familiar to anyone who has experienced his earlier work. It particularly comes to life during boss fights, delivering a dance-fuelled groove-like tune that you can't help but hum along to.

Super Adventure Island isn't the easiest game in the series, thanks to some annoying difficulty spikes, but it still remains a lot of fun to play, even if it does feel like something of a step back compared to *Adventure Island 2* on the NES. Fortunately, it's one of the few Super Nintendo games that won't cost you a small fortune to own nowadays, meaning that there's never been a more ideal time to head to paradise and experience Master Higgins' 16-bit SNES adventure. ✱





PF.magic

» [3DO] Rob Fulop says the concept of playing the ball inside a pinball machine in *PaTaank* may have been too innovative for the time.

Following the disappointment of a canned console attachment, PF Magic barked up the right tree with the first game involving a virtual pet, laying the ground for a successful series and a hugely popular genre

Words by David Crookes

» [CD-i] *Max Magic* was a light title intended to have a broad appeal, helping players impress friends with a few tricks.

In 1994, Rob Fulop felt his world crashing down around him, three years after setting up PF Magic with John Scull, a former marketing executive of Apple. The company had been set up to work on an innovative communications device for the Sega Mega Drive called the Edge 16 – a 4800-baud modem which sat on top of the console to allow multiplayer gaming over telephone landlines. But the company funding it, AT&T, decided to pull the plug and PF Magic ended up sitting on the edge of oblivion.

"It wasn't a good time and we were abandoned," says Rob, still smarting at the decision. "AT&T had put $3 million into the Edge 16 and we'd developed the hardware and worked hard on the software, and yet they were cancelling the whole effort and writing it off. A lot of companies would have folded on the spot and AT&T was fine with that happening to us. We had to turn a corner and do something different but it was hard because our whole company had been devoted to this single product."

Had the Edge 16 gone ahead, it would have proven to be innovative. Sega had released a modem in 1990 but it never made it outside of Japan, however the Edge 16 was shaping up well for the US market and attracting attention from Microprose, Tengen, GameTek and EA. Sega was also on board, with each company eager to allow PF Magic to make the necessary tweaks to their games. When it was showcased at the CES in Chicago in the Summer of 1993, *CVG* magazine said it was "a nice glimpse of the future".

Those who saw it, feted the device for its ability to dial Edge 16-owning friends and not only allow gamers to play together but chat at the same time. There was a socket for a Mega Drive keyboard and it boosted the console's 64K memory by another 128K. Portable cards could also be inserted to store game data that could be shared with a friend. "Your gaming pal may live on the other side of the city," *CVG* said, "but now you can take him on at *Street Fighter II* without either of you leaving the house."

AT&T made the decision to axe the Edge 16 prior to its intended launch in 1994, by which stage, it had also been in development for the 3DO. "Luckily, we had half the money left and we turned on a dime, but we knew we only had one or two shots," says Rob. Having already worked for Philips on a multiplayer party game called *3rd Degree* for the CD-i in 1992 – "it was like a game show on television," Rob says – PF Magic sought to become a straightforward videogame developer.

For Rob, this was a return to his roots. He had been involved in professional programming since 1978 when he graduated from the University Of California in Berkley and quickly began as an intern at Atari. After working in the coin-op division, he was asked to write games for the Atari 2600 and these included *Night Driver* and *Missile Command*. Rob also cofounded Imagic ▶

» [CDi] Unfortunately for PF Magic, its early games like *Max Magic* failed to make the desired impact with gamers.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Rob Fulop

■ After selling PF Magic to Mindscape in 2000, Fulop joined Playfirst as a senior game designer before working for Videobrain and Zynga. His main interest lay in creative interactive poker games and he was the design director for Hands On Media overseeing the *World Poker Tour* online games. He currently consults for various videogame companies and he joined the indie rock band Bourbon Therapy in California in 2015 as the pianist/keyboardist.

WHAT DOES PF MAGIC ACTUALLY MEAN?

Many have tried to guess what 'PF' stands for in the company's name and ideas have included Partially Funded, Perpetually Fighting and Positive Future. But, according to Rob Fulop, it is none of those.

"When I was at Atari and made many games, a lot of times we didn't really comment our codes very well," he says. "So if something would work and I wasn't really sure how it worked, I would just write 'PF Magic' which meant 'pure fucking magic'.

"We were only bothered that the code was delivering the goods and all that really matters is people have a great experience. The technology behind games is invisible to the customer and they really don't care. It's just fun. It just works. So that's where it came from."

DNA OF PF MAGIC

PUSHING BOUNDARIES

■ PF Magic sought to tread new ground. It initially focussed on the pioneering Edge 16 accessory for the Sega Mega Drive, experimented with the world's first electronic magic kit and composed fighters out of spheres in *Ballz*, giving an age-old genre a fresh spin that would later pave the way for an innovative gaming genre.

FAILED CONSOLES

■ As well as seeing the cancellation of the Edge 16, PF Magic was unlucky with the early consoles it chose to work with: Philips CD-i and the 3DO. Although both systems showed great promise, neither lived up to their promises and so the games PF Magic made for them failed to make an impact.

CONTROVERSY AVOIDANCE

■ Rob Fulop was stung by criticism of *Night Trap*, a game he had made before PF Magic but which was dusted down and released for the Sega Mega-CD in 1992. The resulting furore helped determine the future direction of the company's later games as Rob sought never to attract such negative press again.

VIRTUAL PETS

■ The *Petz* series of games would define PF Magic and once it released *Dogz* and noted its great reception (both by critics and gamers), it based the entire company on the franchise, producing nothing else but new entries until it was sold in 1998. It popularised the virtual pet genre before Tamagotchi was launched in the west.

FORWARD THINKING

■ Above all, PF Magic already looked to the future. It gambled on new technology and moved with the times, even hooking into the early internet to cultivate a thriving subculture around *Petz*. A community hub hosted on PF Magic's website provided downloads and a point of contact for adoring fans.

» [3DO] *Pataank* was a game of the Nineties, hence the use of FMV.

in 1981, creating such gems as *Demon Magic*. He went on to formed Interactive Productions which worked with Axlon on games for a unreleased console called Control-Vision that put titles on to VHS tapes.

One of those games was *Night Trap*, shot over 16 days in 1987 using real-life actors in Culver City, California, at a cost of $1.5 million. Five years later – and without Rob's involvement – it was ported to Sega's Mega-CD with extra footage by Digital Pictures yet it proved hugely controversial. Senator Joe Lieberman called it out for its violence and it was pulled from the shelves of Toys 'R' Us and Kay-Bee. Sega took action in January 1994 and Rob felt hugely embarrassed.

"Even though my involvement was five years prior and I was now at PF Magic, my name was on the game and it was very upsetting to have it criticised so much," he says. "The game was being discussed on TV and it was quite unfair, but it also was embarrassing to see it singled out as a very violent game." As a result, Rob decided his next titles should be cute. "I didn't want to make any more games that had any kind of violence in it," he says. "This made sense to me."

Even so, PF Magic released, *Ballz 3D: Fighting At Its Ballziest* for the Mega Drive and SNES, and it did have a slightly violent edge although it had been developed with the Edge 16 in mind in 1993, before Rob made his decision. Published by Accolade and released in 1994, it had fighters made up of balls and it was quite surreal, infused with crazy characters including a farting monkey and a twirling ballerina dancer. Beat an opponent and their body of balls would separate and roll across the ground. A version was released for the 3DO, too.

The studio also developed *Max Magic* for the CD-i which allowed users to learn and customise 14 tricks, with the player using the controller to fool their friends with potentially jaw-dropping reveals. It worked on *PaTaank* for the 3DO, too, putting players in control of a ball inside a pinball machine. Neither of these did particularly well, however.

"Philips and 3DO put the money up for these titles but they were our concepts and our intellectual property," says Rob. "We were drawn to the machines because they would allow you to work with real images and audio and that was a new paradigm which could open us up to new things. Unfortunately, the trouble with the CD-i was that the early adopters were a techie audience and not the mass market Philips was targeting, so it was a technology that never really found itself."

With that in mind, PF Magic turned to developing games for the PC and Mac and Rob's decision to concentrate on the cutest possible games manifested itself in a title about dogs. "I had wanted to develop a digital pet for years and I'd had it in my notes for a long time," he says. "It now felt right to go ahead. The idea was to create a dog that you could pet and it would respond. We took the technology we made for *Ballz* and created a puppy dog from the spheres."

Dogz: Your Computer Pet was a sensation, predating the launch of the Tamagotchi by a year. PF Magic had chosen a dog as its debut animal after visiting the department store Macy's at Christmas and being told by Santa that kids constantly ask for a puppy. By creating the character out of spheres, they would be able to keep track of how they'd connect and produce a dog with smooth, fluid animation. Players

» [SNES] *Ballz* helped PF Magic hone the animation techniques which would make the *Petz* series so impressive.

» [PC] Pretty much anything you could do with a real dog was available to players of *Dogz*, including a nice game of fetch.

» [PC] In *Dogz* players could choose from a variety of canine pals and spend a few minutes each day ensuring they were happy.

> **"Our ambition was greater than the technology allowed"**
> Rob Fulop

would determine what their dog needed based on their knowledge of how they behave and use a cursor to interact, feeding, playing and teaching tricks.

"When you look at *Dogz*, it's hardly a new invention," Rob says. "Dogs exist in the world and we were taking inspiration from that. The innovation was putting it on a computer. Players knew what to do: they could throw a bone and play fetch because they know how a dog is supposed to work. It fit within the paradigm of creating a game that was new and exciting with a track record."

Dogz, designed by Adam C Frank and Ben Resner, was given away for free as a demo that came with five days of virtual food. The hope was that players would become attached to having the pet on their desktop and, once it began to get hungry after the supplies ran out, stump up $20 for a lifetime's supply so that they could keep playing. "The dog would be crying for more food and if players didn't pay 20 bucks, it would continue to whine," Rob says. "It was quite manipulative, but we worked on the premise that if you give a puppy away for five days and ask for it back, most will want to keep it. We sold a million *Dogz*."

PF Magic's stock was riding high. *Dogz*'s success and the approach to selling it put the developer on the map and it began to consider follow-ups. It was largely self-publishing, finding working on games for computers to be more cost-effective than for consoles ("its much cheaper to put a game on floppy disk than take a risk on cartridges"). Besides, Rob didn't believe *Dogz* would work well on console.

» [PC] The cats in *Catz* could become moody and on the verge of tears unless you looked after them well.

"It wouldn't have been a good match for the PlayStation because it was a game you played for 15 minutes every day," he says.

The developer's 50 staff at this time was therefore split. Half worked on the pet-based games of which *Catz* was next, leaving the other half to work on games that never saw the light of day. "We really wanted to make a 3D adventure game but our ambition was greater than the technology allowed," Rob says.

It wasn't long before PF Magic concentrated entirely on their breakthrough formula. *Oddballz: Your Wacky Computer Petz* was released along with sequels for *Dogz* and *Catz*. A *Petz* CD-ROM combined the original animal games and *Oddballz* and there were more outings for *Catz* and *Dogz* to follow.

"We had a team that knew how to do this kind of game so we thought we may as well leverage it," Rob explains. "So we made dogs and cats and birds and pigs and we added two characters on the screen which could interact and make a puppy and that was a big deal. So it turned into a kind of early internet game. Lots of people were creating clubs and swapping pets and all that kind of stuff. Once we started, it wasn't difficult to figure where we should be going with it all."

By 1998, however, Rob was ready to sell the company. "We'd staffed up, adding marketing people and sales people and built our development team and we'd gotten over the struggle to make the first products and raised more finance," Rob says. "We had avoided the route of becoming a developer-for-hire because you can never have 50 people on staff relying on other people paying you but I was tired and John was tired and we weren't getting on that great."

The pair sold the company to Mindscape which had been bought by The Learning Company. The latter was then sold to Mattel and Ubisoft acquired the *Petz* series in 2001, continuing to make additional games until 2014. Rob does have some regrets. "I'm sorry I sold PF Magic but you've got to make that tradeoff," he says. Yet having taken a company from the brink of collapse to once that pioneered a genre, we'd say he arguably bowed out at the purr-fect time. ✱

TIMELINE

- 1991 ■ Rob Fulop and John Scull found PF Magic.
- ■ **A deal is signed with AT&T to develop the Edge 16 modem.**
- 1992 ■ *3rd Degree*, began by Fulop's previous company Interactive Productions, is released on the CD-i.
- ■ **An earlier game by Rob Fulop, *Night Trap*, is released on the Sega Mega-CD to a torrent of controversy.**
- 1993 ■ The Edge 16 is revealed at Summer CES.
- ■ **PF Magic grows to 18 staff.**
- 1994 ■ AT&T cancels the Edge 16.
- ■ **The oddly named *Ballz 3D: Fighting At Its Ballziest* is released.**
- ■ *PaTaank* and *Max Magic* are published on the 3DO and CD-i, respectively.
- 1995 ■ ***Dogz: Your Computer Pet* is released and sells a million.**
- 1996 ■ Follow-up *Catz: Your Computer Petz* is launched.
- ■ **PF Magic attempts a non-animal *Petz* game, *Oddballz*.**
- 1997 ■ *Catz II* and *Dogz II* both hit stores.
- 1998 ■ **Further sequels to PF Magic's *Petz* series launch.**
- ■ PF Magic is sold to Mindscape.

CLASSIC MOMENTS

Point Blank

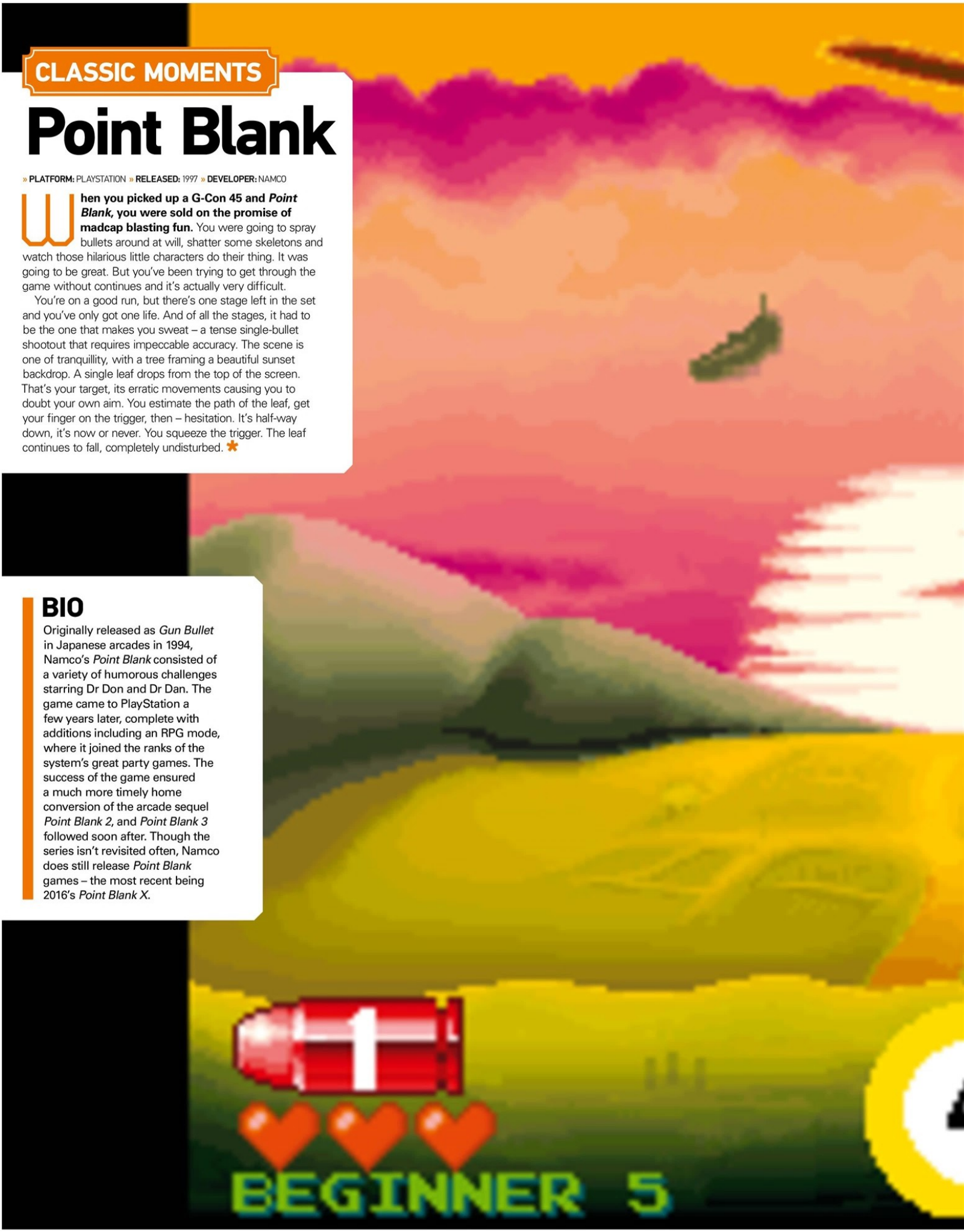
» **PLATFORM:** PLAYSTATION » **RELEASED:** 1997 » **DEVELOPER:** NAMCO

When you picked up a G-Con 45 and *Point Blank*, you were sold on the promise of madcap blasting fun. You were going to spray bullets around at will, shatter some skeletons and watch those hilarious little characters do their thing. It was going to be great. But you've been trying to get through the game without continues and it's actually very difficult.

You're on a good run, but there's one stage left in the set and you've only got one life. And of all the stages, it had to be the one that makes you sweat – a tense single-bullet shootout that requires impeccable accuracy. The scene is one of tranquillity, with a tree framing a beautiful sunset backdrop. A single leaf drops from the top of the screen. That's your target, its erratic movements causing you to doubt your own aim. You estimate the path of the leaf, get your finger on the trigger, then – hesitation. It's half-way down, it's now or never. You squeeze the trigger. The leaf continues to fall, completely undisturbed. ✱

BIO

Originally released as *Gun Bullet* in Japanese arcades in 1994, Namco's *Point Blank* consisted of a variety of humorous challenges starring Dr Don and Dr Dan. The game came to PlayStation a few years later, complete with additions including an RPG mode, where it joined the ranks of the system's great party games. The success of the game ensured a much more timely home conversion of the arcade sequel *Point Blank 2*, and *Point Blank 3* followed soon after. Though the series isn't revisited often, Namco does still release *Point Blank* games – the most recent being 2016's *Point Blank X*.



MORE CLASSIC POINT BLANK MOMENTS

Car Crusher

You know that scumbag that cut you off at the junction earlier? That's his car on the screen, that is. You've got 12 seconds to pump 60 bullets into it, a rate of five shots per second, but that won't be a problem thanks to the sheer rage you're still experiencing after that incident. Let it have it.

Covering Fire

Who sent Dr Don and Dr Dan to the front line? Well, that doesn't matter now – they're here and they need your help. And although they're being attacked by a tank battalion the size of Belgium, those tanks fall to single handgun bullets – so you get some space to admire the terror on the doctors' faces.

Ninja Assault

Point Blank does include a number of sections that are more like traditional light gun games than anything else, which normally test your speed and accuracy. But they can't quite be normal, this being *Point Blank*, so the deadly ninjas you're facing here? They all happen to be cardboard cut-outs.

Explosive Finale

The final stage of *Point Blank* is a fitting send-off – instead of the stressful action of the usual minigames, the only requirement in the last game is to shoot as many fireworks as you can, thus igniting them and giving yourself a spectacular ending. Good job there, comedy marksman!

Press the button

FREE PLAY

PASS
0/ 6
100
85 AMMO

Police Trainer

["HECK" – ED] THE POLICE

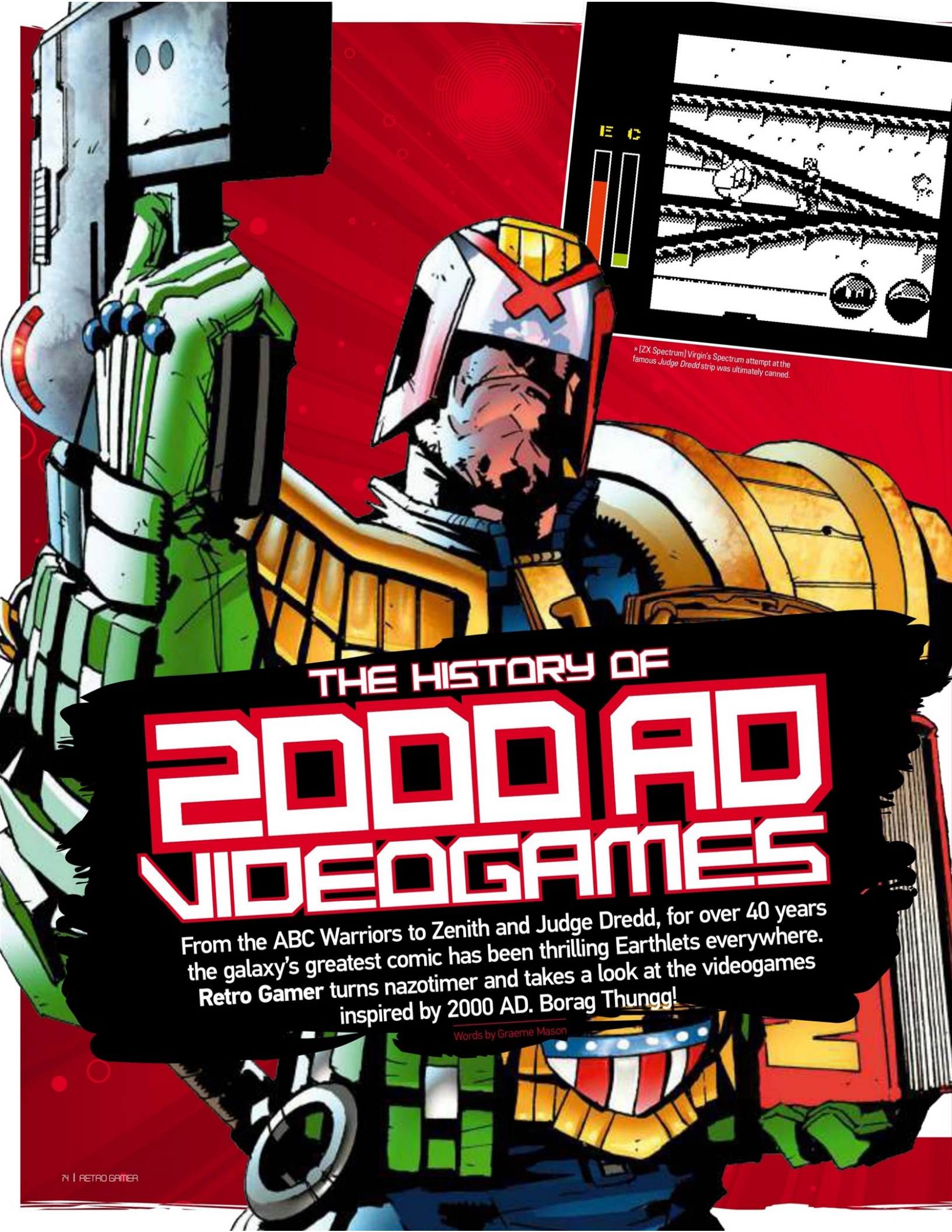
» ARCADE » 1996 » P&P MARKETING

Have you ever ended up hating a game for reasons that had nothing to do with the game itself? I know I have.

Way back in the mid-Nineties, I used to go to karate classes with my dad. He'd quite often be involved in teaching the kids, and then stay behind afterwards for the adult class – which meant that I had free run of the sports centre. If none of my friends were sticking about, I'd usually go and drop whatever change I had into one of the arcade games in the foyer. There were only ever two games, back to back, but they were usually pretty good. Initially, there was *Double Dragon* (the one-on-one Neo-Geo version) and *Taito Power Goal*. *Neo Turf Masters* later went into the Neo-Geo cabinet, and football fun gave way to Sega's excellent *DecAthlete*.

And then, one day, *DecAthlete* was gone and in its place was *Police Trainer*. I *hated Police Trainer*. There's actually nothing wrong with it – it's a pretty competent arcade gun game that consists of a series of shooting gallery challenges against a pseudo-VR backdrop. The idea is that it tests skills you'd need as a police marksman, and the challenges are broken down into categories such as speed, accuracy and visual acuity. But it wasn't the bright, fun game that had been there before, and I hated it for replacing a game that I loved. Deciding that *Police Trainer* was essentially *Point Blank*, but without all the charm and variety of Namco's classic game, I even went through a phase were I would refer to it exclusively as '*Shit Point Blank*' instead of using its actual name.

I feel bad for the developers, who almost certainly had no say in the placement of their game in my hyper-limited location. Objectively speaking I know the game is fine, and it was pretty popular, too, as it even got a sequel. But I can't fight my feelings, and I feel that I'd much rather see Karl Vain and Rick Blade than the featureless dummies of *Police Trainer* in my location. ✱

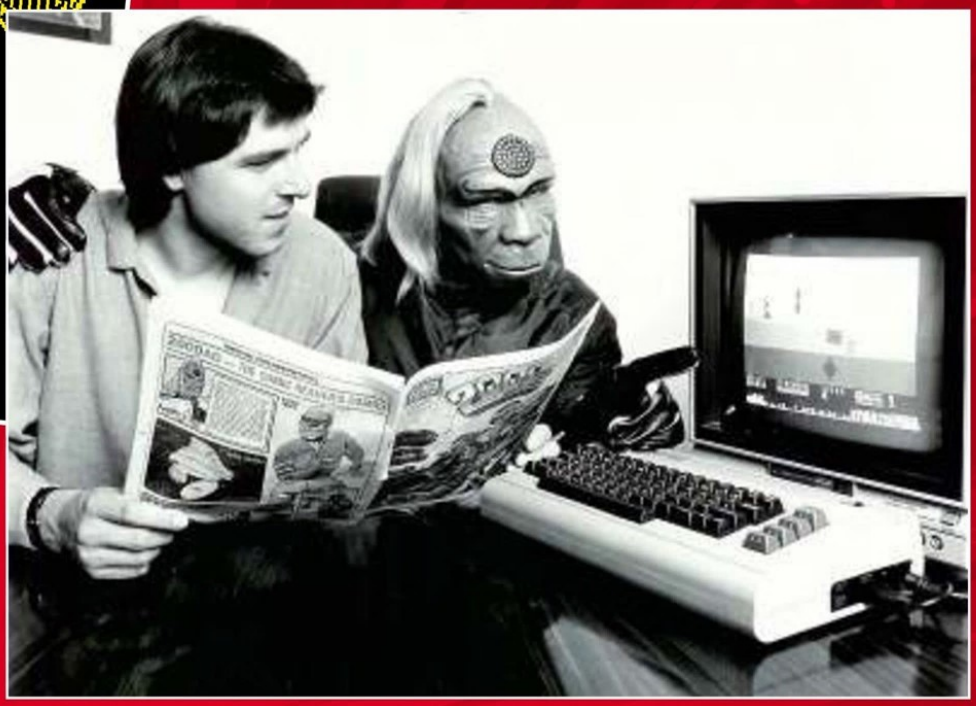


» [ZX Spectrum] Virgin's Spectrum attempt at the famous *Judge Dredd* strip was ultimately canned.

THE HISTORY OF 2000 AD VIDEOGAMES

From the ABC Warriors to Zenith and Judge Dredd, for over 40 years the galaxy's greatest comic has been thrilling Earthlets everywhere. **Retro Gamer** turns nazotimer and takes a look at the videogames inspired by 2000 AD. Borag Thungg!

Words by Graeme Mason



» Mark Eyles reads *2000 AD* while Tharg studies Quicksilva's *Strontium Dog* game on the Commodore 64.

» Jason Kingsley (left) and his brother, Chris founded Rebellion Developments. They purchased all the rights to *2000 AD* in 2000.

» [C64] The ambitious *Judge Death* game from Piranha never saw the light of day.

When the first issue of *2000 AD* hit the newsstands in February 1977, even its galactic editor, Tharg The Mighty, would have been hard-pressed to admit it would still be thrilling readers four decades later. Yet having eclipsed its then-futuristic name, the weekly comic is still going strong, and about to release Prog 2,132, now available in both paper and downloadable form. As befits this longevity, there have been movies, graphic novels, comic spin-offs, toys and merchandising galore based on *2000 AD* characters. And, of course, videogames.

By 1983, *2000 AD* was a solid success for IPC Magazines and its characters were quickly establishing themselves in youth culture. The iron fist of the fascist Judge Dredd, ruling over an overpopulated city called Mega-City One was the flagship strip, but that's not to demean the other weekly stars of the comic. And with each of those came a strong emotional backdrop and a depth of character rarely seen at the time, in what was (like videogames) mainly considered something just for kids: the blue-skinned Genetic Infantryman Rogue Trooper, betrayed by his own side and conversing with his dead colleagues, their personalities transferred into his equipment via electronic chips. Mutant bounty hunter Strontium Dog (AKA Johnny Alpha), hated and feared in equal measure for a condition which he didn't ask for. Or Halo Jones, the teenager who escapes Earth only to fight in a guerrilla war in outer space. The list goes on, yet it was with the gun-for-hire, Johnny Alpha, who became the first *2000 AD* character to move into the world of videogames.

Strontium Dog And The Death Gauntlet, released in 1984 by Quicksilva, was not just the first *2000 AD* licence, but also one of the first character-licensed games on home computers, and the brainchild of Quicksilva's software manager, Mark Eyles. "I had previously spoken to and met the then-editor Richard Burton," says Mark, "who it turned out was a Quicksilva fan. My initial contact had been to write to him asking for a picture of Tharg to help add thrill power to our game development." When the photo arrived, it accompanied a letter from the editor, declaring his love for the ZX81. "So we sent him some games," continues Mark, "and eventually arranged to meet up. I can't remember where it was exactly, but I think it may have been at a Microfair. Our first choice was Judge Dredd, but he wasn't available as he'd already been licensed for a film."

While the movie adaptation of Mega-City One's finest took over ten years to appear, it was just a year later when Strontium Dog made his digital debut. Playing the titular bounty hunter, searching for pals Wulf and Gronk, the aim is to eliminate the Stix Brothers and claim a sizeable bounty in the process. "I worked on the design, and unfortunately it didn't work out as well as we might have liked," admits Mark. Yet despite being a slightly tedious horizontally-scrolling run-and-gunner with little resemblance to the comic strip, *The Death Gauntlet* did not mark the end of Strontium Dog. Later the same year, the ZX Spectrum got its own tale of the mutie bounty hunter, courtesy of a game submitted to Quicksilva from a third-party coder. "The Spectrum game, *Strontium Dog: The Killing*, was one of those incredible coincidences," reveals Mark. "The guys who made it sent it in for us to publish for them, not realising we had licensed *Strontium Dog*. We were understandably keen to publish it!" In the early Eighties, such unsolicited submissions were common and the game's author, Paul Hargreaves, was inspired by his favourite story from *2000 AD*. Appearing in Progs 350 to 359, *The Killing* tells the tale of a deadly contest organised by the Despots Of Zen in which contestants must murder each other until there is one winner, with Johnny Alpha and Wulf using the competition to claim several bounties. The ZX Spectrum's attempt at recreating the story involves a flick-screen maze as Johnny wanders around, killing his rivals. As with *Death Gauntlet*, it barely resembles the comic, but was considered good enough for Quicksilva to stamp its official licence and commission a beautiful Carlos Ezquerra cover.

Despite the popularity of *2000 AD*, only moderate success greeted Quicksilva's ▶

"OUR FIRST CHOICE WAS JUDGE DREDD, BUT HE'D ALREADY BEEN LICENSED FOR A FILM"

Mark Eyles

LARGER THAN LIFE

KEY HEROES FROM 2000 AD

JUDGE DREDD

FIRST APPEARANCE: PROG 2
BEST STORY: THE CURSED EARTH SAGA
NUMBER OF GAMES: 8

The flagship character of *2000 AD*, Dredd proved popular enough to eventually spawn his own comic, the *Judge Dredd Megazine*, in 1990. As the foremost judge, jury and executioner of Mega-City One, Dredd's adventures have seen him pitted against mutants, dinosaurs, rival cities and a huge array of perps. Strong, harsh but lawful, there's always an Iso-Cube ready when Dredd is around.

ROGUE TROOPER

FIRST APPEARANCE: PROG 228
BEST STORY: THE FUTURE OF WAR
NUMBER OF GAMES: 4

Genetically engineered to be able to survive on hostile environments such as the poisoned planet of Nu Earth, Rogue Trooper's fellow infantrymen are slaughtered at the Quartz Zone massacre, betrayed by a traitor from his own side, the Southers. Accompanied by biochipped versions of his former buddies, Rogue finally tracks down the traitor and kills him, and his colleagues are given new bodies.

SLAINE

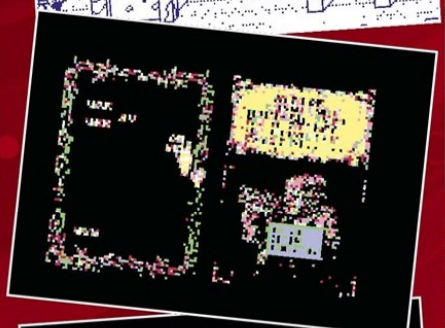
FIRST APPEARANCE: PROG 330
BEST STORY: THE HORNED GOD
NUMBER OF GAMES: 1

Banished from his own tribe, Slaine is an outsider, barbarian, berzerker and all-round nutcase. Accompanied by repulsive dwarf Ukko, Slaine follows a bloody prophecy in which he is predicted to become king, and to help him in that aim he wields an enormous axe against enemies both human and other. The strip was created by Pat Mills, and heavily indebted to Celtic lore and fellow barbarian Conan.

NEMESIS THE WARLOCK

FIRST APPEARANCE: PROG 167 (IN 'COMIC ROCK')
BEST STORY: NEMESIS THE WARLOCK SERIES 1 (ISSUE 222)
NUMBER OF GAMES: 1

Alien protagonist Nemesis made its debut in the bizarre *Comic Rock* and *Killer Watt* strips before setting of on its own in issue 222. Taking its cue from the Spanish Inquisition, Nemesis' main enemy is Torquemada, an evil human determined to rid the galaxy of aliens. A loopy combination of sci-fi and fantasy, there's nothing else quite like *Nemesis The Warlock*.

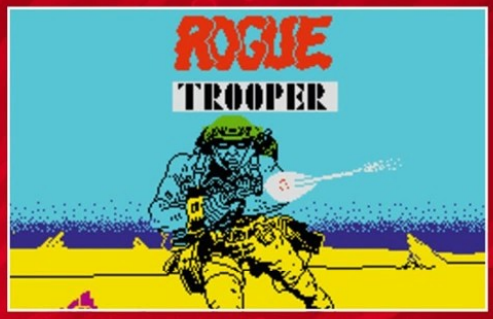


STRONTIUM DOG (JOHNNY ALPHA)

FIRST APPEARANCE: ISSUE 1 (STARLORD), PROG 86 (2000 AD)
BEST STORY: PORTRAIT OF A MUTANT
NUMBER OF GAMES: 2

With his strange piercing white eyes, Johnny Alpha is able to read minds and see through walls – which are useful abilities in his profession as a bounty hunter, along with his outlandish gadgets and weapons. A thin holocaust parable, *Strontium Dog* follows Johnny and his comrade in arms Viking Wulf as they take out bad guys for cash, avoiding the scorn of the lucky 'norms' unaffected by the great war of 2150.

» [Amstrad CPC] Bagman laments as Rogue Trooper prepares to take out some more Norts on Nu Earth.



» [ZX Spectrum] Along with Judge Dredd, Rogue Trooper has proved the most popular videogame *2000 AD* character.

» [Amstrad CPC] *Rogue Trooper* was one of three planned 8-bit releases by Piranha, the other two being *Judge Death* and *Halo Jones*.

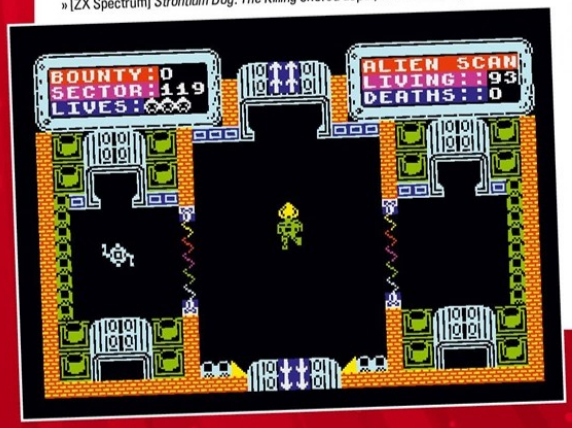
brace of *Strontium Dog* games. The 8-bit publisher, bought out by Argus Press Software a year later, tried its hand at adapting an entirely different comic strip character, Rupert The Bear, before fading from view in the late Eighties. Fortunately, others were prepared to make sure that *2000 AD*'s famous characters continued to appear in pixellated form, starting with Piranha, a newly-formed offshoot of the MacMillan Publishing empire. Unlike Quicksilva, Piranha obtained a number of *2000 AD* characters, no doubt thanks to the clout of its parent company. Three games were advertised: *Halo Jones*, *Judge Death* and *Rogue Trooper*, although only the latter would see commercial release. Set on the war-torn and poisoned planet of Nu Earth, the last Genetic Infantryman must stalk the chem clouds accompanied by his biochipped deceased pals.

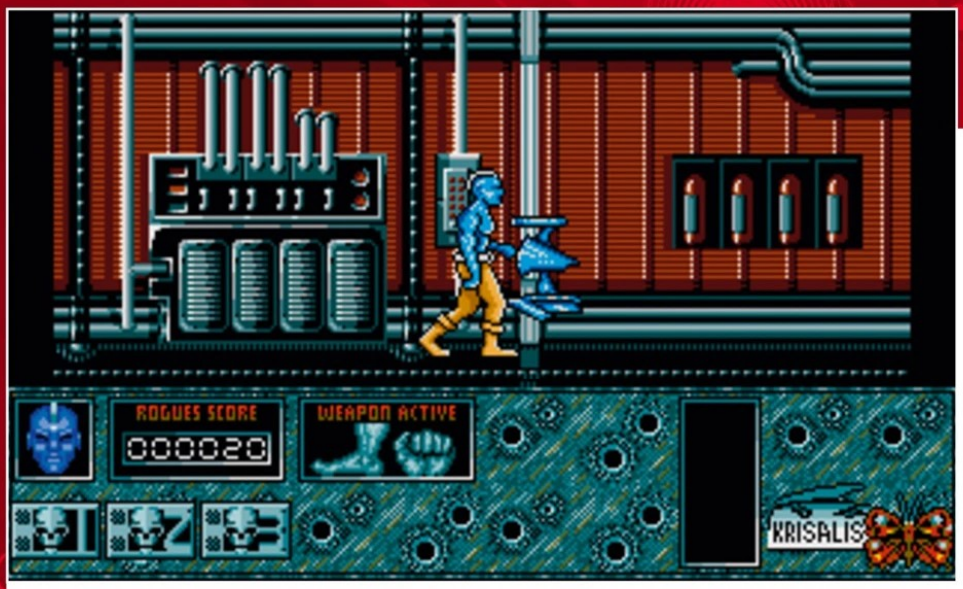
Piranha contracted *Dark Star* developer Design Design to create the shattered Nu Earth, and its programmer, Ian Wareing, opted for an isometric flick-screen style. Anticipation was high among press at the time, although cautious given the earlier games. "MacMillan Software has acquired the rights to *Rogue Trooper*," announced *Crash* magazine in the summer of 1986. "Details on the release date are not yet available, but any improvement upon *Strontium Dog*, which had all the hallmarks of a severe Thrillsucker attack, is likely to be welcomed by comic fans." And indeed the game was an improvement, especially visually, as for the first time a *2000 AD* character had been recreated recognisably. Trudging around the landscape, Rogue Trooper's chips offer chirpy comments, adding to the atmosphere (if nothing actually useful in practice) and melancholy sense of humanity at war with itself. Notably more action-orientated than the majority of isometric games, the tapes are placed randomly every time the player starts again, giving the game an extra degree of variety, and was released in 1986 on the Spectrum and Amstrad, with a C64 version following a year later. *Rogue Trooper* proved to be a decent seller for London-based Piranha, but it wasn't enough to ensure the other two games that it advertised saw the light of day as both *The Ballad Of Halo Jones* and *Judge Death* found themselves caught up in the demise of the MacMillan sub-label.

» [Amstrad CPC] Suitably bloody colours were used in Martech's *Nemesis The Warlock* game.

Previews had appeared everywhere, and in the case of *Halo Jones*, the game was even finished, at least the ZX Spectrum and Amstrad versions. "The *Halo Jones* game came about because I was a big fan of the comic strip and approached Piranha with an idea for the game," says Mike Lewis, whose previous game, the comic strip/adventure game superhero mash-up *Redhawk*, informed much of the look and design of *Halo Jones*. "It was an exploring and fighting game where Halo moves through corridors trying to get to the shopping mall. Along the way she encounters distant drummers and aliens, and could pick up weapons such as grenades." With early previews comparing the aesthetic to a mixture of Gargoyle's *Tir Na Nog* and *Way Of The Exploding Fist*, great things were expected of *The Ballad Of Halo Jones*. Alas it sadly wasn't to be, as Mike explains. "I delivered the master tapes for the ZX Spectrum and Amstrad versions on the day that Piranha was wound up by MacMillan Publishing and, although I was paid the rest of the advance, I couldn't find anyone who wanted to publish it due to licensing complications. And I'd even met Alan Moore at a comics convention while writing the game, starting the conversation by apologising for writing a game based on his creation. He was very nice, but confessed that there wasn't a map of *Halo Jones*' world, which I'd been hoping to find."

» [ZX Spectrum] *Strontium Dog: The Killing* offered depth, but little variety.





» [Atari ST] Some of Mark Potente's excellent artwork for 1991's *Rogue Trooper*, replicating a comic book style.

Over on the Commodore 64, *Judge Death* was taking shape, with the player assuming the role of Judge Dredd's psychic colleague, Psi Judge Anderson, in an ambitious first-person shoot-'em-up. Despite impressive preview shots, the mechanics of the game were proving awkward for its development team, and while a semi-playable update called *Horror City* was revealed years later, the end of Piranha saw any hope of a videogame Judge Death stomping the streets of Mega-City One dashed. But what of Judge Death's main nemesis, the urban pacifier supreme, Judge Dredd? Heavily previewed in the winter of 1986 and 1987, Melbourne House's adaptation of the lawgiver had the press and public enthused at the prospect of seeing the sprawl of Mega-City One finally represented on screen. As development stalled, *Judge Dredd* was finally released in the Spring of 1987, to the disappointment of many, especially on the Commodore 64 where it accrued an embarrassing 13% in *Zzap!64* magazine. As unaspiring as *Judge Death* had been ambitious, developer Beam Software created a dull platform game with a selection of limited comic book stylings (such as speech bubbles) that failed to do Joe Dredd any justice.

Fortunately for *2000 AD* fans, another publisher, Martech Games, had already decided that it wanted to try its hand at licensing characters from the galaxy's greatest comic. "I had three boys and one of them was mad about *2000 AD*, [he] collected them and knew all the artists," recalls David Martin, Martech's owner. Having had success with personality-based games such as *Eddie Kidd's Jump Challenge* and *Sam Fox Strip Poker*, David rolled the dice on the popularity of another particularly British institution. "We went for a meeting with IPC, and Jas Austin gave us the lead with which characters to go for," says David. Jas worked for Martech's in-house development team, Creative Reality, and was a fervent fan of the

CONVERSION CAPERS
JUDGE DREDD MOVIE ADAPTATION

THE BEST AND WORST OF STALLONE'S DIGITAL JUDGE, THE OFFICIAL ADAPTATION FROM ACCLAIM

PC
While visually impressive, this PC port limped out a year after the other games, and failed to find much of an audience as a result. On a platform not endeared generally to platform games, it could be argued it didn't stand much chance anyway; but its poor controls and jerky animation didn't help matters.

MEGA DRIVE
While the murkier graphics are perhaps better suited to the subject matter, this Mega Drive version just loses out to its 16-bit peer. With the basic game style unoriginal (a platform game), the ability to arrest enemies rather than kill them is unusual, but the difficulty is unforgiving in places.

SNES
Graphically superior to the Mega Drive version, this Nintendo game of the *Judge Dredd* movie boasts a lovely rain effect at the start of the game. Controlling the judge is marginally less frustrating too, and the digitised backdrops are easier to negotiate. Like the Mega Drive game, it's unoriginal but diverting enough for fans.

» While 1997's Judge Dredd lightgun game was rather weak, it had some nice box art.

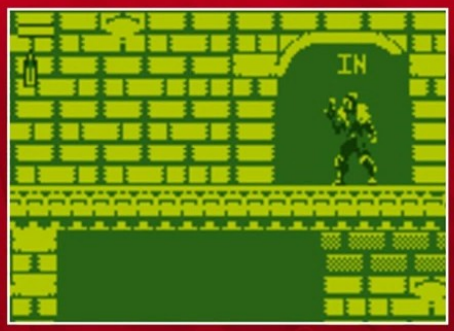
comic. "Jas said we must go for Slaine and Nemesis The Warlock – I think he basically told me his two favourites!" laughs David. "But we said that sounded great, and the strips had some fantastic artwork, although we created some of our own."

By 1986, Creative Reality had already produced another licensed game, *Tarzan*, and a shoot-'em-up, *WAR*, for Martech, both coded by Jas, with graphics by Dave Dew. With the team's other coder, Neil Dodwell, working on an ill-fated multi-event game called *Circus Games*, Jas and Dave busied on *Nemesis The Warlock*. "It was a dream game to work on," says the coder, "and one of my favourites, so we jumped at it. We didn't even put a game design together for Martech – we had an initial meeting, and I told them we were going to do a side-on platform game, while picking a few things out from the comic." Beginning in Prog 167 of *2000 AD*, Nemesis first appeared in a *Comic Rock* story entitled *The Terror Tube*, the freedom fighter escaping his enemy, religious zealot Torquemada. The subsequent series, combining sci-fi with swords and sorcery fantasy quickly gained fans, helped by its unsubtle nods to the Spanish Inquisition and Ku Klux Klan. "We picked a few things such as the acid spit and Nemesis' sword. We were just plucking these ideas from the comic and hoping they would all stick together. But the thing that always gets mentioned is the piling up of bodies." For its readers, one of the most appealing aspects of *2000 AD* had been its reluctance to pull punches when it came to violence and gore, and Martech's *Nemesis The Warlock* echoed this thanks to the gruesome method of which players could proceed from level to level: piling up the bodies of vanquished enemies in order to reach higher platforms. "It was a brilliant idea," recalls David Martin, "and they weren't sure if I'd go for it. But I loved it, and when the bodies would occasionally sprout aliens too. It was a really neat little arcade game."

As befitted the era, Martech was not required to run much past IPC – it trusted the publisher ▶

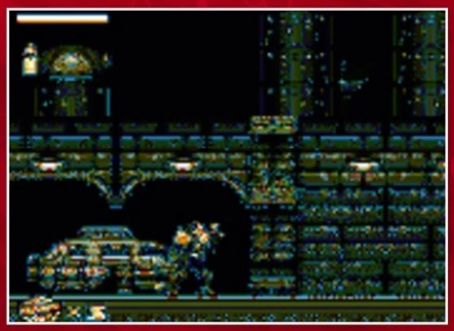
"JAS SAID WE MUST GO FOR SLAINE AND NEMESIS – I THINK HE TOLD ME HIS TWO FAVOURITES!"

David Martin



GAME BOY

While predictably much sparser both in terms of sound and graphics, the Game Boy version still manages to appropriately recreate the world of *Judge Dredd*, while the gameplay is perhaps better suited to the handheld nature of the console. Only the sometimes muddy controls let it down (get up, Dredd!).



GAME GEAR

Sega's Game Gear pulls out all stops for this conversion, and it looks so impressive that you could almost accuse it of Stookie Glanding. Resembling the Mega Drive game in looks, there is also plenty of action to keep you engaged, and it's one of the better platform games on the system.

Q&A: MARK POTENTE

We speak to the artist on Krisalis' stab at bringing Rogue Trooper to the Amiga and Atari ST

Are you a fan of *2000 AD*?
Yeah, I was a big fan of the early comics, I must have had the first few hundred. Unfortunately, not realising the value of them, my brother and I took the front covers off them, hole punched them and put them in binders. There were later binned in a bedroom clear out.

Sad times! What was your involvement on the *Rogue Trooper* game?
I worked on all the environments, comic cutscenes and loading screens. I must admit I loved doing the cutscenes rather than the in-game environments – we didn't have any concept art for the in-game work, mainly relying on roughly-designed pen sketches.

What did you think of the character of *Rogue Trooper*?
I loved it, and the idea of his comrades as biochips was really cool. But the version we had in the game I always thought was too cartoony and the animation didn't look tough enough. He filled a good part of the play area, which made the environments feel claustrophobic. I wasn't a fan of the overly large HUD.

How did the design of the game evolve?
The idea was to create a puzzle platformer, in the same style as *RoboCop*, and a good majority of other games back then. The *Space Harrier* section was bolted on later, and this was probably created as we had done the *Space Harrier* game five years earlier and regurgitated the same code. That section was a bit jarring, but helped break up the side-on sections.

Who else worked on the game?
David Colledge was the only other main artist, he did the character animations and HUD. Peter Harrap and John Scott were responsible for the programming, doing the *Space Harrier* and side-scrolling sections respectively.

What did you think of the final game, and were there any elements you tried to get in but couldn't?
I was a bit disappointed that we didn't do the licence more justice, the reviews as I recall reflected that. And with the backdrops, while I tried to make them as distinctive as possible. I was told to cut out some of the gore, especially from the research lab. Initially there were a lot more dismembered bodies and blood-splattered walls.

Would you have liked to have tried a *Judge Dredd* game? And why didn't Krisalis attempt more *2000 AD* games?
I'm not sure why there were no more, the game received mediocre attention, maybe that had something to do with it. We were all big *2000 AD* fans at Krisalis, so it would have been fun to work on other characters.

» [GameCube] Rebellion purchased the licence to *2000 AD* in 2000, and three years later is produced its first game based on the comic book, starring its most popular character: *Judge Dredd Vs Judge Death*.

to create a videogame that did justice to the comic strip. "We never met anyone from *2000 AD*, not even Tharg," smiles Jas, "and personally I was quite pleased with the result. It wasn't a Crash Smash, but I still get lots of comments about it today." With *Nemesis* completed, Jas and Dave began work on its follow up, planning something much more elaborate for the mad Celtic Barbarian Slaine. "We really wanted to do something different and I remember at the time I was playing a lot of text adventures," recalls Jas. "So I created this system that was supposed to represent the fevered mind of a berzerker like Slaine." Dubbed Reflex, the technology was proudly announced in *Slaine*'s adverts as the next big thing in videogames. "Yeah, it was a bit rubbish, though," laughs Jas. "We were hoping to make a big thing out of it, but it was just too frustrating." Within the crowded screens of *Slaine*, scene-setting text appears at the top-right, above images of the barbarian and his colleague Ukko. To the left, and occupying half the screen, commands drift in and out randomly, leaving the player a split-second to select the required instruction. "The problem was, you couldn't do the simple things easily," explains Jas. "Say you wanted to go west – you had to wait for it to come up, and if you missed it you had to wait again." Gameplay aside, *Slaine* looks the part, with Dave Dew's artistic talents on display throughout, from the detailed portraits of its characters to the ghostly skeletal hand used to select commands. "Dave's graphics were always top-notch, but sometimes you need someone to say, 'No, that's not working,'" Jas notes. "Martech would have just looked at the game when we showed them a work in progress, seen that it looked good and trusted we knew what we were doing. It had some unusual ideas, and I'm still kinda proud of it, as it's still talked about today, although maybe for the wrong reasons!"

With *Slaine* selling poorly, further plans for *2000 AD* games, and indeed the Reflex system, were shelved by Martech. With Piranha no more, it was left to Melbourne House, now owned by Virgin Mastertronic to attempt an improvement of its previous *2000 AD* game, *Judge Dredd*. Simon Pick, then working for developer The Sales Curve, takes up the story. "We'd just finished *Silkworm* for Virgin, which was a great game that sold really well and made them keen to work with us again. I had just finished working on the Commodore 64 version of *Shinobi* and had the vague idea that we'd just make a game similar to *Shinobi* but make it *Judge Dredd*-styled. That seemed to be a good idea until someone pointed out that Judge Dredd never appeared to jump like that, at which point we should probably have given up the idea of making it a platform game. But for some reason we pressed on." *Judge Dredd* mark two therefore appeared intrinsically similar to its predecessor. "We had some great mock-ups put together by one of the artists but couldn't get them working in the game," says Simon. The result, with an inexperienced team helped by Simon as project manager, was a visually bland game as Dredd once more patrolled Mega City One, downing perps when not wandering the empty streets. "We were up against a tight deadline," notes Simon, "and we dropped features on a weekly basis as time got shorter. It's the game that I am most unhappy with from my career, but on the plus side most of the coders went on to become industry veterans, doing great work." With the Amstrad and Spectrum versions stuck in an Iso-Cube, the Commodore 64 and 16-bit games met with more indifference. Would everyone's favourite fascist cop ever get a decent game?

Maybe, but first, a year later, appeared a little-known Amiga and Atari ST interpretation of the hero of Nu Earth, Rogue Trooper. Formed in 1987, Teque Software developed a handful of 8-bit games in the late Eighties, creating its own publishing label, Krisalis. Coded by Peter Harrap, known mainly as the man behind the *Monty Mole* games, *Rogue Trooper* is, again, set on Nu Earth as the Genetic Infantryman, captured by those dastardly Norts, must first escape his prison before jetting across the poisoned landscape to the Souther base. Once there he must battle once more (he is wanted for treason, after all) before presenting its command with evidence of the traitor general who betrayed the genetic warriors at the Quartz Zone massacre. Notable for its combination of side-on and *Space Harrier*-style views, *Rogue Trooper* failed to build on the moderate success of the previous game, and was the only *2000 AD* licence from Krisalis.

Four years passed before the release of the maligned *Judge Dredd* movie starring Sylvester Stallone, prompting the latest *2000 AD*-related game. Published by Acclaim, and developed by Probe Software, *Judge Dredd The Movie* debuted on the Mega Drive, SNES, Game Gear, PC and Game Boy. Following the plot of the movie as closely as a standard platform game can, it's a decent side-scrolling game with some nice elements, such as being able to arrest enemies having wounded them. Despite lacking originality, it fared better than Gremlin Interactive's PlayStation lightgun effort of two years later, which is based directly on the comics rather than the movie. As *PSM* magazine denounced in May 1998, "Where *Judge Dredd* really fails is its total lack of being fun," With the comic itself soldiering on, the gaming side of *2000 AD* went quiet, with just 1998's *Judge Dredd Pinball* released. Then, in the prophetic year of 2000, Rebellion Developments, founded by Chris and Jason Kingsley, purchased the comic and brand. Renowned for its movie mash up adaptation *Aliens Vs Predator*, Rebellion's founders were keen fans of IPC's finest. "I bought issue one from the newsagent by the chip shop on my way back from

"WE WERE UP AGAINST A TIGHT DEADLINE AND WE DROPPED FEATURES ON A WEEKLY BASIS"

Simon Pick

OH DROKK!

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE JUDGE DREDD ARCADE GAME?

Having had notable success with *Mortal Kombat* and its sequel, Midway Games was looking to expand its graphical style into more games in the early Nineties. Given the brutality endemic in the famous beat-'em-up series, a brawler featuring Judge Dredd appeared a logical move. The idea caught on, and in a format that heavily resembled another of Midway's earlier hits, the violent *Narc*, Dredd traverses several Mega-City One locations, beating up and shooting perps. With the game near-complete, it was field tested, and this is where the story takes a downward turn. Whether tired of the format or simply ignorance of the characters involved, the testing proved disastrous and the project was canned.

Today, thanks to the internet, we can find out how *Judge Dredd* for the arcade was looking, and Midway's designers appeared to have nailed the look and feel of *Dredd*'s dystopian universe. While the star himself looks a little on the portly side, the mass of Day-Glo perps, a busy background and amusing nods to the comic ('NO DROWNING' orders the city ordinance in the sewer) show that the people behind the game had at least a good knowledge of the source material.

school," remembers Jason Kingsley, "although I lost the space spinner that weekend on the top of my gran's garage!" As primarily a videogames developer, the idea was clearly to adapt some of the comic's most famous characters to the small screen. "We had a load of different ideas, and the reason for approaching *2000 AD* in the first place was because I wanted to license Johnny Alpha for a computer game, but was rejected and wanted to know why," Jason remembers. "Then, after a long series of twists and turns, we ended up acquiring the whole thing and have never regretted it for a moment, although some would say it was a pretty crazy thing for a games company to do!" Rebellion's first game was not based on Strontium Dog, however, but rather the comic book's premier hero and his most dangerous foe, Judges Dredd and Death in *Judge Dredd Vs Judge Death*. "All of it was based on comic tropes and themes, but with the twists necessary to make it a compelling experience," continues Jason. Pitching the two diverse lawgivers against each other resulted in an uneven first-person shooter that satisfactorily adapted the look and feel of Mega-City One.

» [Switch] More recently for *2000 AD* videogames, a 'redux' version of *Rogue Trooper* appeared in 2017.

It was three years before Rebellion released its next *2000 AD* game, and it proved to be one of the best. But why choose to adapt *Rogue Trooper*? "Guns feature in many big computer games, and aiming at something is probably one of the most accessible things a player can do," explains Jason. "Future war gave us loads of possibilities for enemies to fight against, and the setting of Nu Earth is visually different and interesting. Plus the chem clouds meant we could legitimately have coloured fog in the distance." *Rogue Trooper* became a solid hit, not just for its evocative location but also the pioneering cover mechanics that the game employed. "It was a big success," notes Jason, "and the first cover-based shooter. Our innovation was not always acknowledged at the time, but I have it on good authority that the mechanics were carefully studied and built upon for many games that came afterwards."

Sadly, beyond a redux of *Rogue Trooper* in 2017, and a 2011 mobile game, there have been no further *2000 AD* games from the Rebellion stable, although its CEO and founder is cagey about what future shocks await us. "*2000 AD* generally has interested, multidimensional characters that have strong personalities and backgrounds," concludes Jason. "And this means you have a good solid base of ideas to build gameplay on top of. *2000 AD* is probably more influential than many people realise." With the comic still going strong and a *Rogue Trooper* movie apparently in the works, we could soon see more *2000 AD* videogames. Splundig vur Thrigg! ★

THE UNCONVERTED

Arcade games that never made it home

GO! GO! MILE SMILE

DEVELOPER: **FUUKI** YEAR: **1995** GENRE: **MAZE**

■ **Sometimes it isn't hard to see why a game never made it to home systems.** Honestly, when the first word that comes to mind to describe a game is 'anachronism', it probably isn't a good thing. *Go! Go! Mile Smile* is quite enticing, but we're imagining that it would have been a pretty tough sell in the arcade market of 1995. Even if maze games hadn't fallen out of fashion long before the mid-Nineties, by that point players had access juggernauts such as *Sega Rally, Tekken* and other 3D extravaganzas – and we could play some of them at home, too, thanks to a roster of decent console and computer ports. Of course, we're not the type to be concerned about whether or not a game was fashionable when it was released, because we're not tremendously concerned about that now – and it turns out that Fuuki's colourful maze game is quite neat.

Go! Go! Mile Smile plays like a cross between *Pac-Man* and *Qix*. You play as an egg, operating from within a protected perimeter zone, and must venture out into the maze to collect items in order to move onto the next stage. Of course, it's never an easy task as the maze is populated by evil critters that would quite like to wreck your day.

Your journey into the maze leaves behind a chain of chicks, and the further you probe the more danger you're in – not only are you unable to cross your own path, but enemies can hit at any point along the chain. Opportunities to defeat enemies are limited to rare power-up appearances, but you do at least have a quick retreat button to pull yourself out of dangerous situations. Every so often you'll encounter a boss battle, which switches things up a little by giving you target-based challenges.

In terms of presentation, it's not the most sophisticated looking game. The two dimensional graphics aren't cutting edge – especially considering that it was released in 1995 – and the sounds are mostly just passable, although we do have a soft spot for the dodgy English voice work. But it's all pleasant enough, and if you divorce it from the context of its release date it's a pretty compelling example of the maze game genre.

■ These switches marked 'Push!' are the key to defeating the boss. Later bosses require you to push the correct switch, or have many active at once.

■ The boss itself will stay in this area, but the arrows show the locations from which it will launch attacks. Go near them only when necessary!

■ The key to high scores is to pick up lots of items without fully retreating to the safe zone, as doing so will reset your score multiplier.

■ Most enemies have a start-up delay to their attacks, giving you a chance to retreat – so long as it's attacking the front of your line.

CONVERTED ALTERNATIVE

VOLFIED

1989

■ There's not a lot that directly compares to *Go Go Mile Smile*, so we've gone for a *Qix* variant instead. This one's great, with plenty of power-ups and interesting backdrops. It was converted to many systems including the PC Engine, Mega Drive, Commodore 64 and the 16-bit home computers.

AQUA RUSH

DEVELOPER: **NAMCO** YEAR: **1999** GENRE: **PUZZLE**

■ **We're not entirely sure why Namco chose an aquatic theme for this puzzle game, as it has little bearing on the game design.** However, that doesn't particularly matter as the game itself is rather interesting. Your job is to reach the end of a long column of blocks in *Tetris*-esque fashion. The primary differences are that you're scrolling the screen upwards, and that instead of tetrominoes, you get blocks that are three spaces wide. You can add your own extensions to all three columns using the game's three buttons, and when one line is clear, all the remaining blocks shift upwards, detaching from one another to fill in the gaps and create combos. The game quickly becomes quite challenging as you've only got a short amount of time to decide on the sort of shape you want to create, but thankfully it's broken into stages rather than being endless.

We're genuinely quite surprised that this one never came to consoles, as it doesn't seem like it would tax the PlayStation, a format Namco was prolific on. But it's also quite light on content and would probably have required some work to bulk up for a home release – and that's only if you could get past the odd theme in the first place.

» [Arcade] These stage layouts can be tricky – see how it blocks lines from forming?

CONVERTED ALTERNATIVE

PUZZLED

1990

■ This is a lot like *Aqua Rush*, but you're going down the screen, you're using tetrominoes and you only have to free the trapped balloon. It's available from the comfort of your living room on Neo-Geo AES and CD, on modern consoles digitally via *Arcade Archives*, and on the Neo-Geo X and Neo-Geo Mini.

CONVERTED ALTERNATIVE

NFL BLITZ

1997

■ Midway's juiced up take on American football includes real teams rather than crazy themed gangs, but provides similar thrills thanks to its lax interpretation of the rules – sadly, the NFL required the outlandish shenanigans to be cut back in later games. You can get it for PlayStation and Saturn.

DIRTY PIGSKIN FOOTBALL

DEVELOPER: **PLAY MECHANIX** YEAR: **2004** GENRE: **SPORTS**

■ **If you've ever longed for an American football game where convicts face off against wrestlers and aliens throw down with Vikings, congratulations – you have a very imaginative mind.** And luckily, your ideal game also happens to exist in the form of this Atomiswave sports outing.

Dirty Pigskin's brand of gridiron is simplified. Teams have five players each, and many aspects of the game have been removed – there are no penalties, kicking and first downs for making yards, so if you can't score in four attempts then you'll turn possession over to the opposition. The three-button control scheme offers you a couple of passing options on offence, the ability to tackle and change players on defence, and a turbo button on both. Once your special bar is filled, it's possible to perform a special pass or tackle turbo. These changes make for a considerably quicker and more exciting take on the sport.

Unfortunately, Play Mechanix's games don't tend to come home and this one was no different. It could have been fun, but it would have needed a lot of work to meet the expectations of a console game in the mid-Noughties.

» [Arcade] Arenas are themed, as you can see by the this outer space alien stadium.

BEST LEFT IN THE ARCADE

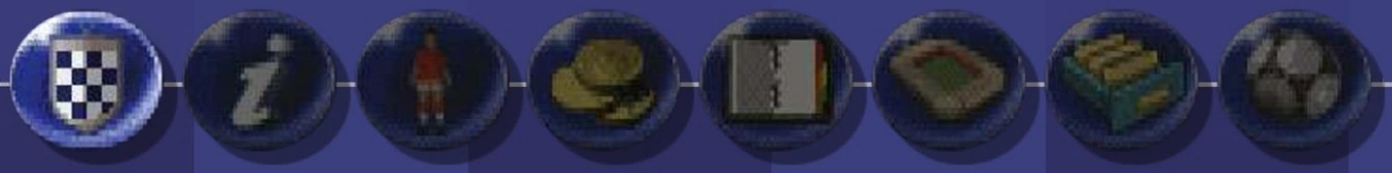
BEST OF BEST

DEVELOPER: **SUNA** YEAR: **1994** GENRE: **FIGHTING**

■ **Few titles have failed more spectacularly to live up to their name than *Best Of Best*.** Here is a low-rent *Street Fighter II* tribute act, complete with woeful balance issues, amateurish graphics and some truly bizarre design decisions. We're not sure why the Statue Of Liberty climbs the side of a boat that you're fighting on, but it does. Even the interesting ideas fail in their execution – fighters can crawl away when recovering, but if you attack as they do, the game displays a message on the screen that criticises you as 'unmanly'!

What's remarkable is that this game came out in 1994, a time when fighting game innovation and quality was at a zenith in the arcades. Could you imagine playing this over the likes of *Super Street Fighter II Turbo, Mortal Kombat II, The King Of Fighters 94, Virtua Fighter 2* and *Tekken*? Absolutely not.

Is it unfair to expect a small Korean developer to compete with the top end of the fighting game market? Probably. But frankly, life isn't fair and your life is likely too precious to waste on games this underwhelming.



THE MAKING OF

LMA Manager

The majority of football management games have traditionally thrived on PC. But Codemasters' LMA Manager was successful in targeting the PlayStation alone. We talk to its producer about the game's unique features and series-defining legacy

Words by Fraser Gilbert

There have been countless attempts to replicate *Football Manager*'s success on consoles over the years, but even *Football Manager* hasn't always got it right. Arguably the most notable series to leave a lasting impression was Codemasters' *LMA Manager*.

It began in 1999. Back then, Sports Interactive's *Championship Manager* was well-established and was dominating the football management scene, but competitors weren't in short supply. EA Sports was proving persistent with its new *FA Premier League Football Manager* franchise, while the likes of *Premier Manager* continued to retain a loyal fanbase. The subgenre seemed to be going through somewhat of a boom period, and publishers soon latched on to the hype.

But few of these games were focusing their efforts solely on console. They were, understandably, targeting the traditionally popular PC market, often producing ports for various systems along the way. *LMA Manager* was to take a different approach, being "the only football management game designed specifically for the PlayStation". "Codemasters had been working on an idea for a [football management] game for quite a while," says Simon Prytherch, the producer on *LMA Manager*. "And they showed me what they had – they had the initial research and prototypes for a management game, and I said I think we should go all-in and design it from the ground up."

His decision was based on the desire for a console-only direction. "[Codemasters] were in the process of expanding really rapidly because a lot of the other games were bringing in money. And we were making all that money on consoles," remembers Simon. "We had gone all-in on the PlayStation with *Micro Machines*, *TOCA Race Driver* and *Colin McRae Rally*, and *Colin McRae Rally* and *TOCA* were being developed in parallel with *LMA Manager*."

According to Simon, the initial prototypes had been largely PC-driven, adopting a "*Football Manager*-esque" design. But the decision to switch development to the PlayStation saw *LMA Manager* prioritise a more console-accessible focus, with the goal of allowing players to access everything within two or three button clicks. "That was quite a challenge when you've got so much information in a football game," he reveals.

» [PlayStation] *LMA Manager*'s player models aren't overly detailed, but there's a varied enough selection on display.

» [PlayStation] Unlike its sequels, *LMA Manager* only includes the ability to play with English teams.

» [PlayStation] The game uses visual aids instead of stats to identify players' strengths and weaknesses.

> **"Wherever possible, everything should be visible at a glance"**
> Simon Prytherch

The developer achieved this by developing the series' now-famed tab system, utilising all four of the PlayStation controller's shoulder buttons to transition between different menus. This, combined with the face buttons, ensured navigation remained a breeze, even when engaging in complex transfer negotiations. And crucially, it never left you pining for the comfort of a keyboard and mouse.

"The first thing we did was put together a prototype of the user interface," explains Simon. "So that we could illustrate how quick it would be to get to any part of the screen – we did a couple of key screens like tactics and team selection, and when people saw that and had a feel of that, they felt it would make playing a management game really easy on a console."

There were other considerations to take into account as well. The intent wasn't to overload *LMA Manager* with a stat-heavy interface, given its quick and accessible nature. Then again, it also required enough depth to compete with similar management titles on the market. Simon and his team decided upon a unique approach to differentiate *LMA* from its peers.

"What we wanted to do was set ourselves apart in every screenshot from other management games, so we didn't want to have lots of numbers on the screen," Simon explains. "So wherever possible, everything should be visible at a glance on a pretty low-res TV screen. Which meant the bars that represented 0-100 had graduations in them, and if you wanted to know what position a football player could play, it would shade a part of the football pitch next to them. So you would see at a glance how good a player was by the length of the bars and the positions they would play."

LMA Manager still retained the core features of many typical management games. It allowed players to take control of any English league team and compete in one of ten scenario-based challenges, or opt for the more exhaustive choice of embarking on a 50-year career. You could manipulate lineups, tactics, and the transfer market to your advantage, as well as managing aspects such as training and finances to help curate long-term success. ▶

Pitch perfect

What set LMA apart from its rivals

The first *LMA Manager* was notable for its inclusion of a stadium editor. This allowed you to expand your stadium as the seasons wore on. The game's prebuilt stadiums were impressive, too, including lifelike representations of famous arenas such as Old Trafford and Stamford Bridge.

"The PlayStation has limited RAM [...], so everything needed to be done in parts," Simon Prytherch explains. "We built [the stadiums] like Lego... and then in order to get the closest match with a particular club – as the games developed – we grew that list of parts so that you could get bigger and better and more varied stadiums."

Even despite those limitations, the stadium editor included some fairly extensive customisation options. Each potential upgrade was offered in various styles, and there was even the ability to add corners to both ends of the ground, resulting in plenty of bespoke ideas to help develop a unique look for your stadium.

History of LMA games

Our match report on the football manager series

LMA MANAGER

■ The original game highlighted its 3D match engine, 1999/2000 season stats and "immersive after-match TV show" as key selling points. It became a hit in the UK, with Codemasters promoting it as the "PlayStation's best-selling football management game".

LMA MANAGER 2001

■ The sequel to *LMA Manager* was released in March of 2001, improving on its predecessor in almost every way. The big enhancement was that of the match engine, which now boasted more graphical fidelity and the ability to shout instructions at your players mid-game.

LMA MANAGER 2002

■ This was the first game in the series to migrate to Sony's follow-up console, the PlayStation 2. With it came another momentous jump in visual quality and the ability to manage teams from across Europe. It was also the final entry to be released on the original PlayStation.

LMA MANAGER 2003

■ *LMA* debuted on the original Xbox with this version. The game featured an enhanced highlight system and various AI improvements, as well as 'post-match banter' from Alan Hansen and Gary Lineker. And for the first time, you could actually name a new stadium!

IN THE KNOW

» **PUBLISHER:** Codemasters
» **DEVELOPER:** Codemasters
» **RELEASED:** 1999
» **PLATFORM:** PlayStation
» **GENRE:** Sports management

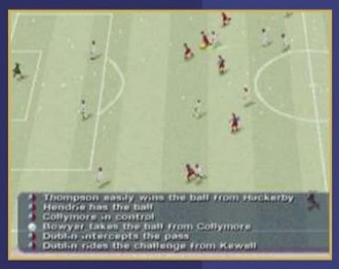
DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

MICRO MACHINES
SYSTEM: VARIOUS
YEAR: 1991

COLIN MCRAE RALLY
SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION, PC, GAME BOY COLOR
YEAR: 1998

LMA MANAGER
SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION
YEAR: 1999

F1 2019
SYSTEM: PS4, XBOX ONE, PC
YEAR: 2019



» [PlayStation] It's common to find yourself competing in various weather conditions, including rain, fog and snow.

Its biggest hook, however, served as the inclusion of an extensive 3D highlights engine. While the games themselves would play out amidst an engaging top-down view, it was the TV-style post-game recap that really captured players' imaginations. The idea was to develop an immersive feature with alluring graphical prowess.

"We realised on the low-powered PlayStation, we wouldn't be able to do [in-game highlights] because we wanted to make it look really polished," says Simon. "So what we developed was a system to generate highlights based on loads and loads of presets which were polished, and then being able to flip it into the four quadrants of the pitch."

The new system allowed for highlights to be replicated in various ways depending on the scenario. "We'd only have to develop a move for a quarter of the pitch, and that way we could then multiply that move by four by mirroring it and flipping it into the other quadrant," he explains. "We developed a whole load of tools basically to set up those highlights, and then during the game, the action would be mapped to the closest fitting highlight."

These highlights, combined with short full-motion video punditry segments, led to the post-game show emitting a convincing *Match Of The Day* feel. The addition of Alan Hansen and Ray Stubbs as commentators only enhanced this further, with the use of their voices contributing a sense of authenticity to the broadcast-like presentation.

The highlight system and the rest of the game's in-depth features were a struggle to implement in time for release, however. *LMA* had proved a more exhaustive project than originally planned, and it became apparent that more development time would be required.

"I think it took 18 months in development – maybe a bit longer," says Simon. "The plan was that we were going to go for the previous season's launch, but once we started development, we realised this was going to be a bigger game. And so we went back to the directors at Codemasters and I secured another year's worth of development."

Much of the development team had to be sourced from scratch, too. In its prototype stages, the game had started out with just three people on board. But as the project began to take hold, Simon focused his efforts on acquiring fresh new talent.

"Because Codemasters were expanding really rapidly, what I did was concentrate on hiring enthusiastic – technically able, but really enthusiastic graduates," he says. "All of the ones that we recruited for that project have gone on to do bigger and better things. "Like the main guy doing the football engine, for instance, Gary Paterson (*LMA* 2001-2003) – he went on to head up *FIFA* on the technical side."

The extra development time also led to the team seeking the approval of the League Managers Association. The LMA had served – and still does

» [PlayStation] Highlights are packed with near misses and often hilariously blatant red cards, as well as goals.

LMA MANAGER 2004

■ There was another sizeable overhaul in the visuals department for *LMA 2004*. The bright new menus freshened up the series' look, while the big new feature was that of a Fantasy Team mode, allowing you to create a club and draft your own players.

LMA MANAGER 2005

■ The series experimented with the PC in 2005 under the title of *LMA Professional Manager*. But it was the console versions that continued to prove most popular, implementing additional updates to the match engine and providing a more realistic transfer system.

LMA MANAGER 2006

■ It was time for another revamp with *LMA 2006*, with the game sporting a brand-new look. Both the 3D match engine and transfer market were again reworked, and you could also engage in 3D training matches and make your own manager (with PS2 EyeToy support!).

LMA MANAGER 2007

■ Last but not least, the series made the transition to the Xbox 360. The match engine benefited from significantly improved graphics and widescreen support, and the game boasted "far more detail than ever before." *LMA 2007* was also released on the PS2 and PC.

– as a "collective, representative voice" of English Premier League and Football League teams, making the organisation a suitable fit. "They were interested in raising their profile and nobody else had approached them," says Simon. "And so we found it quite easy to talk to them. They shared quite a lot with us."

With that collaboration came a significant degree of responsibility. The team was committed to delivering a statistically accurate game, but with four tiers of playable leagues (and European teams included as well), the task was sizeable. Unlike other established management sims, Codemasters didn't have a pre-existing database to build upon.

"What we did was we recruited locally within the Leamington area – football fans, basically – that were really good at computer skills. And we set up a really easy data entry system using Microsoft Access, but building a front-end into that," Simon explains. "And those football fans, I tasked them by saying, look – I want you to contact every football club's fan club, because they know their side inside out, and basically build a network through email and other contacts."

This only added to the time-consuming work required by the team. It proved a stretch to meet the deadline, even despite the extended schedule. "We worked extremely hard and I think, during that year, there were some long hours," Simon admits. "So yeah, we were working extremely hard and looking to have a very polished game that would have a massive impact when it was launched."

When it finally released in late 1999, *LMA Manager* was met with critical acclaim. Fans and reviewers alike praised its control scheme and authentic gameplay elements, as well as its immersive 3D highlights feature. The hard work had paid off.

"We had a lot of press going into it and people had high expectations," says Simon, noting that the team would regularly receive letters from passionate fans. "We were elated [when it succeeded] because we were all convinced that this was going to be big, and we'd internally convinced directors and marketing, so I think we'd have had a lot of egg on our faces if it had flopped."

Its success led to significant growth. *LMA Manager* was followed up two years later with a sequel, in which the match engine was significantly enhanced and the menus were freshened up. It then made a successful transition to the PS2 and original Xbox, implementing a visually impressive 3D engine that negated the need for pregenerated highlights. The franchise eventually drew to a close shortly following *LMA 2007*'s debut on the Xbox 360.

By then, times had changed. Simon had left the company in 2003 – he suggests the series perhaps suffered from a lack of "real groundbreaking features" in its final years. But as for his own experiences, he recalls the franchise – particularly the first game – as a notable career high.

» [PlayStation] The team training menu features some neat visual animations based on each player's assigned routine.

> **"I still look back at it now and think, 'That's one of the top three peaks in my career, if not the top'"**
> Simon Prytherch

"I've worked with many great teams, and even now I have fond memories of the first *LMA Manager*. You don't get many moments in your career like that, where everyone gels and is pulling in the same direction," he says. "I still look back at it now and think, 'That's one of the top three peaks in my career, if not the top.'"

It's now been well over a decade since *LMA Manager*'s cancellation, and exactly 20 years since its debut on PlayStation. And yet, people are still talking about it. The series undoubtedly left a significant imprint on both the games industry and many football fans' hearts, with its original iteration laying the foundations for one of the most enjoyable sports management franchises of all time. ★

Game Boy Micro fact

■ Although Nintendo promoted the removable faceplates as a feature worldwide, it never actually released its official Game Boy Micro faceplates outside of Japan.

PROCESSOR: ARM7 32-BIT CPU (16.8 MHZ)
RAM: 256KB MAIN MEMORY, 96+32KB GRAPHICS MEMORY
GRAPHICS: 240X160 DISPLAY, UP TO 512 COLOURS ON-SCREEN (FROM 32,768 PALETTE) 128 SPRITES PER FRAME, HARDWARE SCALING AND ROTATION EFFECTS
AUDIO: TWO 8-BIT DAC, TWO SQUARE WAVE CHANNELS, ONE WAVE CHANNEL, ONE NOISE CHANNEL
MEDIA: ROM CARTRIDGE (UP TO 256 MEGABIT)
POWER: RECHARGEABLE LITHIUM-ION BATTERY (APPROX EIGHT-HOUR LIFESPAN)

Game Boy Micro

» **MANUFACTURER:** Nintendo » **YEAR:** 2005 » **COST:** £69.99 (launch), £50+ (today)

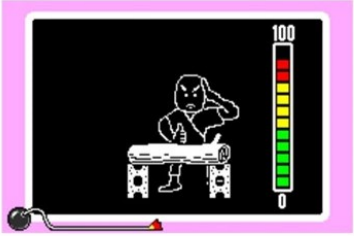
Although Nintendo had previously framed the DS as the 'third pillar' of its hardware strategy, few players believed that there was much of a future for the Game Boy Advance line following the dual-screened device's strong launch. But the company surprised everyone by unveiling a tiny revision of the older hardware at E3 2005. On stage, Reggie Fils-Aime highlighted the machine's customisable faceplates and claimed that "no matter how tight your jeans, it'll still fit in your pocket" – aiming the hardware at "image-conscious consumers". But he also noted that it wouldn't succeed the existing Game Boy Advance line, and would instead retail alongside it.

While it did have a headphone jack, unlike the Game Boy Advance SP, the Game Boy Micro was missing a lot of features from the rest of the Game Boy Advance line. Backwards compatibility was out, and many peripherals wouldn't work with the system due to the radical change in form factor. You even needed an adaptor to use existing link cables. The tiny size of the machine and brilliant display weren't enough to convince consumers to pick the Game Boy Micro over the Game Boy Advance SP or DS, and the console was soon available for deep discounts. Ultimately, it sold just 2.42 million units.

EDITOR'S CHOICE

WarioWare, Inc: Minigame Mania

If you have an exceptionally portable handheld console that is genuinely pocket-sized, you ideally want to run a game that is enjoyable regardless of how much (or how little) spare time you have. *WarioWare* is the perfect fit for this job, offering wafer-thin slices of gaming pleasure that neatly fill any gaps in your schedule, while always leaving room for one more. Have a quick nibble if you have a few minutes between meetings, or gorge yourself when you're on a lengthy train journey. Either way, it's a delicious game with which to enjoy this dinky handheld.



VINCENT BAILLET

From coder to studio manager, Vincent Baillet's fast-rising career arguably mirrored the growth of the French games industry. But, as he tells **Retro Gamer**, the "32-bit console earthquake" shook away a lot of freedom

Words by David Crookes

"I'm not sure I have enough to say to fill six pages," says Vincent Baillet, modestly, when **Retro Gamer** approaches him with a request for an interview. We, however, were sure he had. After all, Baillet worked for the French publisher Loriciel for ten years from 1984 before becoming a studio manager at Psygnosis for a further five – just as the PlayStation was cementing its number one position in the industry. He then became a studio director for Infogrames when it was snapping up developers left, right and centre, only to go it alone and forge a successful career path making mobile titles and advising others. So as one of the most successful French videogame devs, it was clear he'd have lots to say. "I've done my homework," he told us, when he was finally ready to spill the beans.

It's said that France came late to videogaming, but what was the French videogame scene like in the late Seventies/early Eighties and what was the first game you played?
I wasn't allowed to have a home version of *Pong* when it was released in the Seventies because my parents thought that plugging a console into a television could destroy it. But there was a shopping centre near where I lived and it had a few arcade games. *Space Invaders* became the first game that I played and *Galaxian* was the second but I probably didn't play either of them a lot. They cost one Franc per game and that was a lot of money for children so my first experience with videogames was, in many ways, frustrating.

But were you excited about the computers being launched at the time?
Among the first computers that I came across were an Apple II, because my mathematics teacher had one, and a Commodore PET 2001 but I also had a friend who bought a Tandy TRS80 and another one had a Commodore CBM 3000. I recall we spent a lot of time experiencing various things on these computers and that we were a little afraid that our experiments could destroy these precious machines.

Which computer did you have and why did you decide that was the one you wanted?
The first computer I owned was a ZX81 and I bought it because it was cheap. I bought the 'kit version' because it was the only one I could afford. For those who don't know, this was a DIY version of the ZX81 and when you bought it, you received a printed circuit board, and all the components to solder on.

Having a computer at home was rather unusual at that time. Most people didn't even know what the purpose of that machine actually was. Looking back, I was probably seen as some sort of alchemist: somebody who would go on to spend days and nights writing texts in a strange language that nobody could understand.

Did the ZX81 introduce you to coding, then?
No. I actually started programming using my TI-57 programmable calculator. I then moved on to another calculator called the HP-41C which was made by Hewlett Packard and which a friend lent me. Learning how to program on these machines was a good introduction and a great education. To get good results, you had to care a lot about the speed and the memory usage of the devices. The more constraints that you had, the more you had to use your brain – and it's fair to say that these machines were full of constraints! Compared to them, the ZX81 was a much more comfortable machine because it had a lot of MHz and RAM.

Are we right in saying that it was the Oric-1 which unleashed your talent, though?
Well, for a start, I'm not sure that I have a talent [laughs], but let me explain. Before having an Oric-1, I was a ▶

> To get good results, you had to care a lot about the speed and the memory usage of the devices
>
> Vincent Baillet

SELECTED TIMELINE

GAMES

- **REVERSI CHAMPION** [1984] ORIC 1, ORIC ATMOS, SEGA SC-3000
- **JEU DE DAMES** [1984] THOMSON MO
- **GALAXION** [1984] ALICE 32/90
- **3D FIGHT** [1985] AMSTRAD CPC
- **FOOT 3D** [1985] AMSTRAD CPC
- **BACTRON** [1986] THOMSON TO, AMSTRAD CPC
- **MAGNETIK TANK** [1986] THOMSON TO, AMSTRAD CPC, ATARI ST, PC
- **MACH 3** [1987] THOMSON MO, THOMSON TO, AMSTRAD CPC, MSX, ZX SPECTRUM, PC, AMIGA, ATARI ST
- **TURBO CUP** [1988] THOMSON TO, AMSTRAD CPC, ZX SPECTRUM, PC, AMIGA, ATARI ST
- **WEST PHASER** [1989] AMSTRAD CPC, PC, AMIGA, ATARI ST
- **TENNIS CUP** [1990] AMSTRAD CPC, PC, AMIGA, ATARI ST, TURBOGRAFX-16, TURBOGRAFX CD
- **BABY JO IN: GOING HOME** [1991] AMSTRAD CPC, PC, AMIGA, ATARI ST, TURBOGRAFX CD
- **BEST OF THE BEST: CHAMPIONSHIP KARATE** [1993] AMSTRAD CPC, PC, AMIGA, GAME BOY, MEGA DRIVE, NES, SNES
- **TOMMY MOE'S WINTER EXTREME: SKIING & SNOWBOARDING** [1994] SNES
- **VAL D'ISÈRE SKIING AND SNOWBOARDING** [1994] ATARI JAGUAR
- **ADIDAS POWER SOCCER** [1996] PLAYSTATION, PC
- **THE CITY OF LOST CHILDREN** [1997] PC
- **ADIDAS POWER SOCCER INTERNATIONAL '97** [1997] PLAYSTATION
- **O.D.T.: ESCAPE... OR DIE TRYING** [1998, UNRELEASED] PLAYSTATION, PC, NINTENDO 64
- **CORSAIRS: CONQUEST AT SEA** [1999] PC
- **WORMS ARMAGEDDON** [2000] GAME BOY COLOR
- **TINTIN: DESTINATION ADVENTURE** [2001] PLAYSTATION, PC
- **AUTOBAHN RACER: POLICE MADNESS** [2007] MOBILE
- **BOMBING BASTARDS** [2014] PS4, PS VITA, WII U, NINTENDO SWITCH, PC, MAC, LINUX, IOS, ANDROID

> "Each game that we made was a new challenge, and in a lot of ways the challenge was more important"
> Vincent Baillet

strong Othello player – or Reversi as it is also known. At the time, a French monthly computer magazine called *L'ordinateur Individuel* organised Othello computer tournaments so I decided that I would program an Othello game on the HP-41C calculator, and later on my ZX81. My software proved to be quite good but that is probably because I must have spent about a trillion hours working to optimise it. The Oric-1 came later. I had bought one of these computers with the first salary I earned in my summer job and so I developed my Othello game for it. It was named *Reversi Champion* and, once the game was finished, I travelled to Paris to show it to Laurant Weill of Loriciel because I had read in a magazine that he was looking for new games. And I came back with a distribution contract.

Were there alternatives to Loriciel at the time?
Not really. In France, at that time, there were not many publishers. There were Ere Informatique, Sprite, Ubisoft, Infogrames, Loriciel and Cobra, from memory, but I think that I ended up choosing Loriciel because they had publicly said they were looking for games to publish. Laurant Weill and Marc Bayle were nice people, and what they offered me for my game was way beyond my dreams so I didn't call the other publishers and decided to go with them.

It was the start of a long relationship. Which games did you start working on at Loriciel?
I had started with Loriciel as a freelance programmer because I still had to finish my studies. But since everybody was happy with *Reversi Champion*, I was asked if I would work on a conversion for the Sega Yeno SC3000 [note: Sega's SC-3000 computer was distributed in France by ITMC under the 'Yeno' brand]. I was then tasked with completing another conversion for a machine by Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC). It was a kind of strange PC. By that point, I had become bored making games of Othello so I switched to working on a French-Checker game on the Thomson MO5.

Around 1984, the Amstrad was released and I had become bored with games that needed to use the mind so I worked on a shoot-'em-up called *3D Fight*. It was a big success at the time and it was a bit strange for me to earn more than my parents while still being a student. After the success of *3D Fight*, I decided to stop studying, and I called Laurant in order to see if he had a real, full-time job for me. That was the start of eight years of an exciting adventure with Loriciel and I worked on lots and lots of games such as *Mach 3, Bactron, West Phaser, Turbo Cup, Val d'Isère Championship*, and many, many more. I also worked on a display engine that ended up being used in many Loriciel games and, on top of that, I sometimes had to help other developers with various aspects of their games, whether that was optimisation or debugging or some other technical thing they needed.

How was the company structured?
When I started working for Loriciel, the company was employing fewer than ten people. But working for

» The programmable calculator, the TI-57 by Texas Instruments, allowed Vincent Baillet his first taste of programming.

» Vincent created one game for the Alice 32, *Galaxion*, which was released in 1984.

» [Thomson MO] Titles like *Jeu de Dames* were based on traditional board games.

FIVE TO PLAY

Our picks from Vincent's back catalogue

VAL D'ISÈRE CHAMPIONSHIP

■ Developed for the Jaguar as *Val d'Isère Skiing And Snowboarding*, this realistic enough sim boasted freestyle, training and competitive modes and allowed players to use skis or a snowboard as they hurtled down the slopes.

MACH 3

■ Players needed to keep a finger close to the trigger when piloting *Mach 3*'s spacecraft. For as well as dodging incoming alien ordinance, it was necessary to keep blasting at an assortment of ground targets. Superb animation and sound adds to the atmosphere.

TURBO CUP

■ This was a rather simple racing game, with players seeking to determine their grid position trying to beat 21 competitors over four tracks. The game was inspired by driver René Metge and some copies came with a scaled model of his Porsche 944 Turbo.

BACTRON

■ This has a curious premise: you play as an antibiotic within a body which needs to reactivate enzymes that had been affected by a virus. It involves working through a maze of screens, interacting with obstacles and trying not be drained of energy.

ODT: ESCAPE... OR DIE TRYING

■ Vincent Baillet was studio manager of Psygnosis Paris for this quirky adventure. It drew comparisons with *Tomb Raider* while drawing on RPG elements. Its puzzle elements and strong characters are decent.

Loriciel had been a great pleasure from the start and it meant that I was able to work with some people who are still my friends 20 years later.

Were you allowed to be creative and were you able to experiment with coding techniques and different styles of play?
Yes! We were mainly working on the games that we wanted to make but most of us were focusing on the profitable ones. We had great pleasure experimenting with all kind of funny, technical things. This was possible because the teams were small and the timescales were short.

French developers have often been seen to have trodden a different path to those in the UK and USA: there was a sense that games made in France would better reflect the country of origin and that a lot of attention was paid to graphics and quirky gameplay. Is this a fair assessment and, if so, what motivated developers to do that?
I think that point of view is subjective – it's just a view of the mind. Yes, some 'different games' did come from France, but I also remember that you could have said the same for some English games and that the same applied to some Japanese, too. Maybe here in France, we are a little more open to strange things, but you guys in the United Kingdom are not bad at this kind of thing also. Anyway, the videogame industry is a fast-moving industry and being different is a good way to attract attention.

» [Amstrad CPC] *3D Fight* reminds us a little bit of the Sega arcade game *Buck Rogers: Planet Of Zoom*.

France also had a strong demo scene which would push the boundaries of computers. Were you among those wanting to get the most out of a computer? And which computers do you think you and Loriciel pushed better than developers elsewhere?
To be honest, I've not been too interested in the demo scene. I've seen nice things on the Amiga, but lots of the tricks used were not repeatable on a real, commercial videogame.

Of all of the Loriciel games that you made, which ones were you most proud of and why?
For me, *Val d'Isère Championship*, *Turbo Cup*, *West Phaser*, *Bactron* and *Mach 3* made me most proud but there were a lot of others, too. Each game that we made was a new challenge, and in a lot of ways the challenge was more important than the game itself.

Did you feel, after developing *Val d'Isère Skiing And Snowboarding* that you could leave Loriciel on a high? Oh, and are you an avid skier?
Hmm… no, I'm not an avid skier, unfortunately. Come to think, I've worked on *Turbo Cup* but I'm not a Porsche driver, either (even though I would like to be). I'm also not a futuristic aircraft pilot, but I've worked on the development of *Mach 3*. And, I'm not sure, but I don't think the *Assassin's Creed* team actually comes from ancient Egypt [laughs].

Seriously, though, *Val d'Isère Championship* was a great project to work on. Olivier Richez and Philippe Tesson are great people and they were motivated and efficient. We had a great pleasure working on the Super Nintendo version and it is unfortunate that Loriciel's bankruptcy came during the Atari Jaguar conversion. I had not completed much of the work on the Jaguar version but all credit had to go to Olivier, Philippe and their new team.

» [Amstrad CPC] *Foot* had been started by Carlo Perconti who left Loriciel before the end of the project, so the reigns were passed to Vincent Baillet to finish it off.

It was at this point that you left Loriciel, wasn't it?
Yes. At the same time, Psygnosis contacted me about a new job and it was related to a secret new machine.

It's certainly true to say that some developers struggled with the jump to 32-bit and, indeed, to 64-bit consoles: how did you cope with this seismic move yourself and how excited were you about the PlayStation – the secret machine we are assuming you are alluding to?
Well, there are tons of things to say about the 32-bit console earthquake and I could fill many pages with these tales alone. It had been a difficult time for a lot of programmers and artists: suddenly 3D was the new thing and it required a lot of new competencies. It was as if most of our existing skills were obsolete and, at the same time, projects were also becoming much bigger. There were bigger teams and far longer project durations. So we had to learn the basics of management for this leap forward, and we had to learn different method of project management because any problems were multiplied. Before the move to 3D, teams had a sense of freedom, but with bigger projects we ▶

» [SNES] Vincent says he doesn't remember making *Best Of The Best Championship Karate*, but he is credited in the manual.

> It was important for us to be profitable, and we had to be creative at the same time
> Vincent Baillet

» [PlayStation] As studio manager, Vincent oversaw the use of the full 3D for *Tintin*.

needed organisation and financial pragmatism. It definitely had a clear effect on the teams' freedoms.

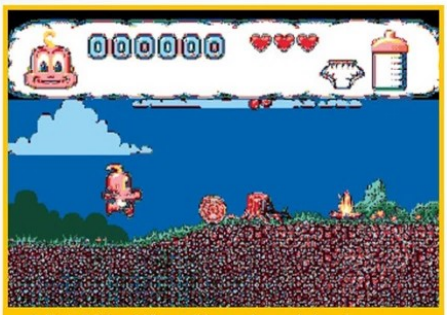
How did you have to adapt, though?
As the teams were getting bigger, people were becoming more specialised in some of the tasks. I think the move to 32-bit also played a role in the fact that there was a renewal of talents. But, despite that, the best people – certainly the most motivated of the old-fashioned talents – did succeed in keeping their roles during this earthquake. I switched to a management role and I became the boss of Psygnosis Paris. That was a big step, but Sony Psygnosis did a lot to help all of the new managers. As it turned out, Sony had been a great school; a wonderful education. But then it's a brilliant company that deserves its past and present successes.

How did your own approach to gaming change over the next five years with Psygnosis and what games did you enjoy working on and why?
First of all, I stopped being involved in the actual game content. As a manager, I had to ensure that the games were released on time and that they were hitting their budget and were of the required quality. But to do this, I had to give away the creative and technical aspects of developing a game to the teams I was working with. It was important for us to be profitable, and we had to be creative at the same time. So our solution was to develop the *Power Soccer* series (which was a productive cash cow), and then to take a more risky (but more motivating) approach with *ODT – Escape...Or Die Trying*, *3X: The Science Of War* and other games.

ODT – Escape...Or Die Trying was a nice project with a brilliant team. The producer (Jean-Baptiste Bolcato) is a very skilled and efficient developer and he is also a nice guy, so I didn't have a lots of things to really deal with on that project. I think I'm on the 'credits' for *ODT – Escape...Or Die Trying*, but, in truth, the team had done it without much work on my side. I just tried to create the good conditions for them to make a great game.

3X: The Science Of War had been much more complex, though, because of the technical aspects that were involved but also because some people within Psygnosis US and UK didn't want or understand this game. Making new things is sometimes difficult, and you have to struggle to make it happen. This was the case with *3X: The Science Of War*.

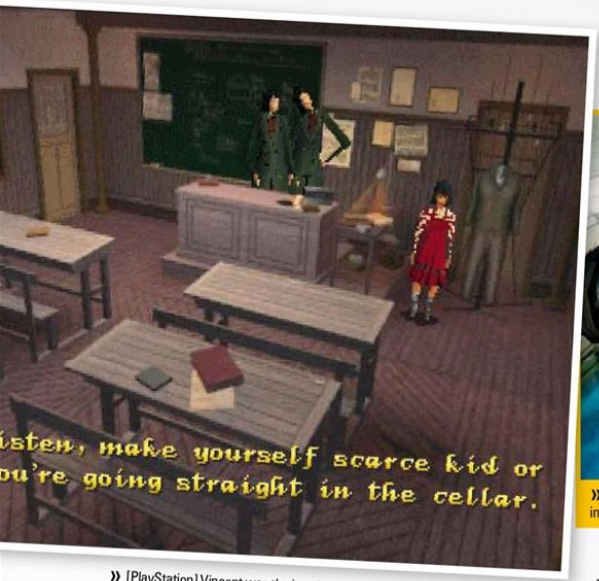
Why did you choose to leave Sony and Psygnosis and move to Infogrames. How did you feel about the company's rapid expansion at this time: was it something that opened up fresh gaming opportunities for you?
Infogrames' expansion was a bit strange. Some companies were bought (such as Psygnosis Paris and Gremlin Graphics) but they were considered to be a 'war takeover' rather than a new part of the company. We had never been fully integrated within Infogrames and it didn't bring lots of pleasure for the Paris teams.



» [Amiga] Although Vincent did not work extensively on the Amiga, he did some debugging of this version of *Baby Jo*.

» [Amiga] Vincent is credited as having lend technical support to the fantastic looking split-screen *Tennis Cup*.

This was a time when the marketing people were deciding everything and the game content was not much of a problem [in their eyes]. That can be good when you work with skilled and nice people, and quite often it was the case. But it can be a nightmare when junior people have too much power and make stupid decisions that impact both the team's motivation and the product quality.



» [PlayStation] Vincent was the interim producer on *The City of Lost Children* during Carole Faure's maternity leave.

» [PlayStation] *Tintin: Destination Adventure* was based on five books involving the popular comic book character.

Even so, during the Noughties, French companies really grew in stature and games flourished. What did you do after leaving Infogrames in 2001?
I took a holiday for six months and then I went to work for Kalisto just before it closed. I tried to escape from the videogame industry and then I started to develop games for mobile phones.

It's interesting that you moved into smartphone development in 2003. Had you predicted that it would become popular?
It's difficult to compare the mobile games market before and after the iPhone/Android boom. Smartphones arrived in 2006-2007, and tablets arrived a bit later, so it was a niche market before 2006, and it only really became a complete industry when Apple and Google came in. But, as always, nobody had predicted that, the first iPhone developers took big risks: after all, there was no guarantee that they would have any return on their investment because the iPhone was a elitist phone that few people could afford. But, as always in this industry, taking a risk sometime pays off. Now, this is not a golden rule: some developers did invest on the Nokia N-Gage after all, but the videogame industry is like the Gold Rush, everybody is looking for the golden nugget, but you need to be both talented and lucky to find it.

Are you still active in videogaming today?
Yes. I'm now a teacher in several videogame and non-videogame schools and I am mainly teaching project management, game design and videogame culture. I'm also a consultant dealing with project management and organisation inside and outside the videogame industry. Most of the development studios waste a lot of money with delays and lack of organisation, so it's a good investment to spend some money on me. Until last November, I'd been Atlangames' vice president. Atlangames is the cluster of video game companies in the west of France and my role was to develop this industry in our region. I'm also working on a small videogame which is great because it helps me to understand what it takes and means to be a videogame developer nowadays. I need to keep in touch with the reality of development in order to avoid becoming an obsolete consultant.

Are there are any French developers that you particularly admire?
I admire Éric Chahi for many reasons: he's a good programmer, a good artist, a good game designer, he is creative as nobody else is, and he is also a very nice and friendly guy. As a programmer, I also had to reverse engineer the code of other people, and learned a lot from what Remy Herbulot (*Macadam Bumper, Crafton & Xunk...)* has done. I've never met him, but he's a guy I highly respect. Of course: Shigeru Miyamoto, who is a living god. He's probably the first one to have fully understood what was a videogame. We all are very small compared to him. And all of my talented friends: Philippe and Olivier Richez, Philippe Tesson, Christophe Gomez, Michel Winogradoff, Vincent Noiret. And lots of others.

» [PC] Vincent Baillet has continued to keep up with technology and he did some testing on *Bombing Bastards*.

When you look back at the last three decades, what would you say were the key moments in your career, and what would you have changed if you had the chance?
Going to Infogrames was probably a mistake for me as well as for the people I used to work with. These talented people could probably have made a better use of their talents elsewhere. I was probably not the right person for that job, because I do not have the political skills required by a company such as that. But as we said earlier, this industry is full of risks, and you need to take some sometime. ★

YOU ASK THE QUESTIONS

Vincent takes a peek into our mailbag

ERIC: What machine was the lead for *Turbo Cup,* and how did you go about programming the other versions?

The lead machine was the Atari 520ST, and it was probably the best version. I enjoyed working on it. The compiling time was long, so I had a lot of time to speak with friends, smoke cigarettes and have coffees with my colleagues.

ERIC: Did you use any challenging coding features for *Turbo Cup* and what is your favourite version?

I remember that the sound aspects were challenging: you had to make dynamic motor sounds (depending on the speed of the car), so we recorded a real Porsche 944. But it sounded flat and uninteresting, so I recorded the sound of a two-cylinder motorbike, that I duplicated in order to have four cylinders. The sound was perfect, but it's not the sound of a Porsche.

MERMAN: Were there any unreleased or unfinished games you worked on?

Yes, many. Sometimes you stop a project because it's crap, or because you're the only one who thinks it's brilliant, or because your company goes bankrupt, or because the machine you're working on is not a success anymore, or because marketing people don't like it, or because one stupid-but-powerful-guy cancels the project.

MERMAN: Did you ever program for the Commodore 64?

No, the C64 was not the huge success that the CPC was in France. CPC success here did hide a lot of others – ZX Spectrum, C64, BBC, TI99-4 etc.

Alien Trilogy

READ THE SODDING MANUAL

» SATURN » 1996 » PROBE ENTERTAINMENT

When I visited Play Expo Manchester earlier in the year I scoured the many vendors looking for cheap Saturn games. I didn't really find any, but what I did pick up was *Alien Trilogy* for a very reasonable £12. I'd played it in the past on PlayStation back when it was first released, and I was eager to see how the Saturn version stacked up against it. As it turns out it's actually a very good port. It lacks a few graphical elements that make the PlayStation version look so nice, and the pistol is all but useless, but it's every bit as fun to play.

However, I did notice a few difficulty spikes at certain points in the game. The first comes on level 1-9 when you have to deal with an increased Xenomorph threat and gouts of flame that shoot out from the floor. "Just take it easy," my cousin advised. "You're probably rushing it." After a few abortive attempts, I got past that particular level, took down a queen and finished most of the second set of stages. All was well until I hit 3-3 a festering level of misery with narrow walkways and pits of acid, which rapidly drains your health.

"This level is shit mate," I told my cousin. "If I fall into the acid I can't get back up the slopes and the nearby lifts operate too quick for me to get back on them so I just end up dying."

"You must be doing something wrong or forgetting something," he replied, "just read the manual."

"I'm not reading the sodding manual, it's a first-person shooter – this is just rubbish game design."

After several more attempts over a couple of days I finally completed the game and (those few moments aside) deeply enjoyed it. *Alien Trilogy* actually holds up really well and while it mechanically shows its age there's still plenty of variety thanks to the decent mission structure that the team implemented.

Just under a week later, I got a call from my cousin as he'd been playing it on PlayStation to see if it was as difficult as I was making it out to be. "You do know there's a run button, right? So you can easily get on lifts and climb up the slopes?" Damn, I should have read the sodding manual. ✱

Charge 002

>> While you won't get to read about Bloodstained this month (it turned up a little too late), we do have some cool stuff, including the latest Samurai Shodown game, a Contra compilation and the latest Sega Ages release. Enjoy

Samurai Shodown

SLICING THROUGH TO THE CORE

INFORMATION

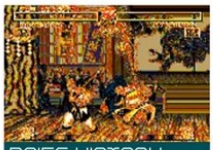
- **FORMAT REVIEWED:** PS4
- **ALSO ON:** XBOX ONE, SWITCH, PC
- **RELEASED:** OUT NOW (PS4/XBOX ONE), WINTER 2019 (PC/SWITCH)
- **PRICE:** £49.99
- **PUBLISHER:** ATHLON GAMES
- **DEVELOPER:** SNK
- **PLAYERS:** 1-2

After the success of *The King Of Fighters XIV*, we had assumed that SNK would revive more of its classic properties, but for some reason *Samurai Shodown* came as a bit of a surprise. We're not entirely sure why, mind you – the original games were popular in the Nineties and SNK is renowned for producing fighting games. Perhaps we were expecting *Metal Slug* instead. In any case, *Samurai Shodown* is a series reboot that the producers would like to crack the esports scene, an ambition that shows SNK is beginning to catch up to the modern market. We think there's every chance that it could take off, too.

For a start, the game is more pleasing to the eye than SNK's last couple of fighters. While the slightly low-budget look of *The King Of Fighters XIV* hasn't completely been eradicated, the team has chosen a stylised look that helps us overlook the odd simple background model here and there. Besides, quite often the game does dazzle – there is certainly no shortage of flashy effects to accompany moves, with the occasional bit of camera direction that recalls the zooming camera of the original Neo Geo game. There's plenty of blood too, which stains characters during fights and serves to highlight the violence, without taking centre stage in quite the same way it does in a *Mortal Kombat* game. Fans will be pleased to note that the background music is appropriately understated, following series traditions, with the use of classical Japanese instruments.

SNK's recent games have been pretty generous with content – *The King Of Fighters XIV* had loads of characters and *SNK Heroines* offered a wealth of customisation options. Unfortunately, *Samurai Shodown* breaks that trend with a perfunctory and relatively unambitious set of features. A reasonable 16 characters make up the standard roster, with 13 returning favourites and three newcomers, but they're at least diverse both visually and in play style. The story mode – essentially an arcade mode with a few cutscenes sprinkled throughout – offers a traditionally infuriating final boss

» [PS4] This white-on-red filter accompanies a successful Lightning Blade attack.



BRIEF HISTORY

» SNK's weapons-based fighting series was introduced in arcades at the height of the early Nineties fighting boom, and quickly captured the imagination of fans. The game was converted across a variety of formats and spawned many sequels, with *Samurai Shodown V Special* having the honour of being the final game released for the Neo Geo AES. The most recent game in the series was 2008's *Samurai Shodown Sen*, an unfortunate Xbox 360 game that continued a tradition of underwhelming attempts to add 3D gameplay to the series. This reboot follows SNK's success in reintroducing the *King Of Fighters* series.

» [PS4] As always, Nakoruru relies on speed and ranged attacks over raw power.

★ PICKS OF THE MONTH

DARRAN

Contra Anniversary Collection

Some might say the games are similar, but for non-stop action you won't be disappointed.

DREW

Bloodstained: Ritual Of The Night

The great news is I have *Bloodstained* on Switch. So far it's a good game, but a disappointing port.

» [PS4] Some attacks, like Earthquake's command throw, reward you with cool camera angles.

✱ WHY NOT TRY

▼ SOMETHING OLD
SAMURAI SHODOWN II (NEO-GEO)

▼ SOMETHING NEW
KOIHIME ENBU RYORAIRAI (PS4)

to tackle, though we had far more trouble with some characters than others. Other single-player modes include regular time attack and survival outings, a gauntlet mode in which you fight every character one after another, and of course a standard versus mode.

The most interesting single-player mode on offer is the Dojo mode, which offers the chance to take on AI ghost representations of real human players, essentially enabling asynchronous battling. Since we were playing an early copy, very little data was available for us to test this out and some of the online ghosts behaved quite oddly, but our own ghost seemed reasonably accurate. Multiplayer modes are limited to versus and online fights, and again we weren't able to test online thoroughly.

So what's left to carry the game is the fighting itself, and this is where *Samurai Shodown* excels. SNK has recognised the fighting model that made the previous games work and preserved it – for the uninitiated, this means major damage from few hits, so a single heavy attack can wipe out as much as a third of your opponent's life bar. The result is that *Samurai Shodown* is a fighting game about the fundamentals, where the manual dexterity needed to perform combos is far less important than knowing when and where to strike. If you leave yourself open with an unsafe attack you can expect to be punished heavily, especially as the game is rich with defensive tricks – Just Defense blocks return from previous SNK games, as do momentary dodges.

On the offensive side of things, regular special moves are handled as you'd expect but the super moves are a bit different. The rage gauge functions as it does in previous games, filling when you receive damage and providing a temporary damage boost when full. While it's full you can attempt a weapon-flipping attack, a hugely damaging move that disarms your opponent, but your window of opportunity is brief as the gauge will automatically drain after a while. You can sacrifice the rage gauge for the opportunity to land a 'Lightning Blade' attack – a single, enormously powerful attack that can wipe out well over half of your opponent's health in one go – but once you've attempted that, it's gone for the rest of the match. Super special moves are similarly limited to a single use per match. In a welcome move, inputs for these attacks have been standardised across characters, so there's no chance you'll forget them.

The result is that *Samurai Shodown*'s fights always possess the kind of tension that most fighting games can only offer at the end of a closely fought round. It's not a particularly fast-paced game, but rounds can be decided in under ten seconds thanks to the high attack damage, so every action takes on heightened significance – especially as you have so few chances to land your most significant moves. Dramatic comebacks are eminently possible, and you can never feel truly safe. These high-risk fights don't just convey the danger of sword fighting and spirit of the series, they set the game apart from just about every other fighter on the market. ✱

» [PS4] Wu-Ruixiang can lay spiky traps for idiots like Earthquake to bumble into.

» [PS4] Newcomer Darli Dagger hits a flashy special on Tam Tam.

In a nutshell

If you're looking for a lot of single-player variety, *Samurai Shodown* might not be the game for you, but we love the emphasis on tactics and timing over execution. For fighting fans with a competitive streak, there's nothing else quite like it.

>> Score **80%**

★ PICK OF THE MONTH

Contra Anniversary Collection

» **System:** Switch (tested), Xbox One, PS4, PC » **Buy it from:** Online » **Buy it for:** £15.99

The last compilation in Konami's anniversary series closes things off with a predictable bang, and we couldn't be happier. The *Contra* series became one of Konami's most popular franchises during the Eighties and Nineties, and the company recently surprised everyone at this year's E3 by announcing that a brand-new game, *Contra: Rogue Corps*, is on the way. Until that arrives we've got this compilation to enjoy, rife with plenty of satisfying shooting action.

The presentation and overall quality of *Contra Anniversary Collection* is extremely similar to the recently released *Castlevania Anniversary Collection*. This makes perfect sense, as it has also been created by emulation masters, M2. You've got excellent emulation, plenty of different screen-tweaking options (including the wonderful Dot Matrix effect for the lone Game Boy game) to ensure the games look as authentic as possible, and a lovely digital book full of fantastic art.

Another similarity with the *Castlevania Anniversary Collection* is that the quality of included games is very, very high. In fact, we'll suggest that it's an even better selection, as not a single poor game has been included. Sure you could argue that this means there's not a lot of variety to the games, but that's true of the previous *Castlevania* compilation as well.

Things kick off with the original arcade version of *Contra* and simply get better from there. There's the arcade sequel, *Super Contra*, the NES conversion of *Contra* and the enhanced NES port, *Super C*, the magnificent *Contra III: The Alien Wars*, Game Boy blaster *Operation C* and the superb (and greatly underrated) *Contra: Hard Corps*.

Seeing that the overall release of *Contra* games is relatively low, it could be argued that M2 could have included all of them (particularly the excellent *Contra Rebirth*), but it's hard to argue with this selection of games and you certainly can't argue with the low price point. Like the *Castlevania Anniversary Collection*, this is a fitting tribute to the much-loved series.

>> Score **87%**

» [Switch] All versions of *Contra: Hard Corps* are included. This is the PAL version, with robots instead of butch men.

» [Switch] The NES version of *Contra* is tough, but at least you can use the Konami code for additional lives.

Timespinner

» **System:** Switch (tested), PC, Linux, Mac, Vita, PS4
» **Buy it from:** Online » **Buy it for:** £14.99

Developer Lunar Ray Games and publisher Chucklefish have teamed up to turn back time to the Nineties for this 2D adventure game that has more than a whiff of *Super Metroid* and *Symphony Of The Night* about it. It's not a rip-off, however: it's more of a homage. You play as Lunais in a time-hopping adventure (that reminded us a little of *Chrono Trigger*, now that we think about it), where you have to explore and fight enemies across multiple time periods. Instead of your typical weapons Lunais wields up to two orbs for her basic attacks, which you can mix and match to your own play style. It's a nice evolution on the formula, but it does tend to play it safe with genre trends.

>> Score **80%**

Cadence Of Hyrule

» **System:** Switch
» **Buy it from:** Online » **Buy it for:** £22.49

What do you get when you cross a traditional 2D *Zelda* game with a rhythm-action roguelike? The answer, apparently, is 'one of the best games in ages'. *Cadence Of Hyrule* takes the mechanics of *Crypt Of The Necrodancer* – where you need to move and attack in time with the beat – and fuses it with the structure of something like *A Link To The Past*, albeit with randomised key item locations, enemy placements, and even elements of map layout. The remixes of classic *Zelda* tunes are amazing, especially the way they intensify when enemies are around and mellow when a screen is clear. Learning enemy movement patterns is crucial to success, and every combination of foes presents a unique obstacle. Endlessly replayable.

>> Score **92%**

Sega Ages: Wonder Boy In Monster Land

» **System:** Switch » **Buy it from:** Online
» **Buy it for:** £5.99

M2's *Sega Ages* range of Switch titles continues to impress and *Wonder Boy In Monster Land* is no different. It includes all the usual bells and whistles from an M2 release, so there are replays, online rankings, the usual excellent adjustment offerings and a fantastic arcade port at its core. M2 has also added numerous challenge modes to wring extra life out of it. Sphinx Challenge and Monster Castle Challenge require you to defeat certain bosses as quickly as possible, while the Fire Ball Challenge sees you trying to score as many points as possible. They're fun additions and round off another essential entry in Sega's long-running series.

>> Score **74%**

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Gamers HOMEBREW

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» [DOS] *Venture Out* was hoping to be *When Zelda Met Breakout*... sort of.

Gaming NEWS

RAPID DEVELOPMENTS

April saw the 44th instalment of Ludum Dare, a game development competition which takes place over a couple of days with each iteration having a theme. This time the entrants had to work with 'your life is currency' and there were over 2,500 entries submitted. That's far too many to cover in detail, but a few stood out to us for one reason or another, and this time they were all for classic systems.

Alien Easter Cat is a combination of shoot-'em-up and avoiding game where the titular feline can trade in some of its lives for credits that in turn pay for shields and bullets. It's very simple and more than a little clunky, but an interesting concept. Another 8-bit entry is *The Stranger*, a flip-screen platformer for the NES where the 'hero' is a scoundrel who has just robbed a stage coach before picking the wrong town to lie low in. Along with critters in the surrounding wilderness, there are trigger-happy locals to worry about.

One of the more unusual contributions is *Venture Out*: it runs on DOS – a download which bundles DOSBox to get the game running on modern machines is available – and was originally intended by its developer to be a cross between *Zelda*-style games and *Breakout*, although that scheme was hampered by the competition deadline so it now leans heavily towards the latter. All of the entries can be found at Kikstart.me.uk/ludum-dare-44.

Crownland is an Atari 8-bit platformer released over a decade ago during the annual ABBUC development competition and a popular game for fans of the machine, but soon they won't be the only 8-bit platform enjoying this colourful game because a conversion to the Amstrad CPC is under way. There's some discussion at the CPCWiki forums over at Kikstart.me.uk/crownland-cpc which includes video footage of the scrolling background and we're looking forward to seeing how this one turns out.

To finish off, an Atari 8-bit developer called Gonzo has been experimenting with the idea of converting *The Predator* to his platform of choice. We're not sure if what he's released so far is actually a workable method to produce the game on the Atari – there have been tech demos for many 8-bit systems over the years which look similarly promising without panning out – but there's some Polish discussion at Kikstart.me.uk/predator-prv-a8 about that.

» [Atari 8-bit] There's no sign of *The Predator* yet, but perhaps he's invisible?

» [NES] The Stranger takes on the perils of the Wild West.

NEW GAMES NEEDED

If you have a homebrew project you would like to see featured then please contact us at: **retrogamer@futurenet.com**

» [Plus/4] Trying to safely get out of the corner after picking up a key.

LOTS OF BERKS

Programmer Jon Williams has been extremely busy of late – not creating *Star Wars* music, that's John Williams you're thinking about. After releasing *Berks 4* on the Atari 8-bits, the developer decided to sit down and port it to the platform where the series originated. It won't fit into a stock Commodore 16 – 64K was required on the Atari version – but anyone with an expanded machine or a Plus/4 can play it. The results are extremely colourful and, as with the Atari version, fans of *Robotron*-style shooting action will have a blast. Take a look behind Kikstart.me.uk/berks-4-264 for the download.

NO BATTERED FISH

Hollywood would have us believe that being a secret agent is glamorous, but the one in *Chip Rescue* on the Spectrum isn't driving a flashy car or even drinking a Martini. Instead he's searching a dingy building for parts of a microchip that, if it falls into the wrong hands, would spell disaster. Platform games are fairly common on the Spectrum, but *Chip Rescue* by Alessandro Grussu is unusual since it was developed without existing tools or libraries. Why not give it a try? The download can be discovered at Kikstart.me.uk/chip-rescue-spec. Sneak over that way for more information.

» [ZX Spectrum] Even if the sneaky behaviour didn't say, 'I'm a spy' that hat would.

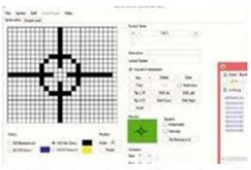
HOMEBREW HEROES

We speak to Stephan Katteneder, whose games, Total Refill and The Coffee Break Shootout, have both just been released as a double pack by Commodore 64 publisher Psytronik

THE BIG INTERVIEW

Where did the idea for *The Coffee Break Shootout* come from?
In 1999 there was a free-to-play game called *Moorhuhn* which was used by Johnny Walker as an advertising gimmick and a productivity killer in offices at the time. I loved it, and when I was looking for a game idea for the Commodore 64, I wanted to pay homage to it. *The Coffee Break Shootout* uses a simpler approach without the scrolling background and only one layer of birds, but otherwise it has *Moorhuhn*'s fingerprints all over it.

And how about *Total Refill*, what was the original inspiration for that?
I wish I could say it was *Tapper*, but I have to admit that I didn't know of *Tapper* before Kenz labelled *Total Refill* as 'Tapper-esque'. The inspiration was a real bar, with the real Chris running it. He was an awesome bartender, always on top of things, a multitasking genius in his job. One evening I thought, 'What an unforgiving job that is, there is constant pressure.' Add to that a little bit of Mario's *Cement Factory* and that's *Total Refill*.



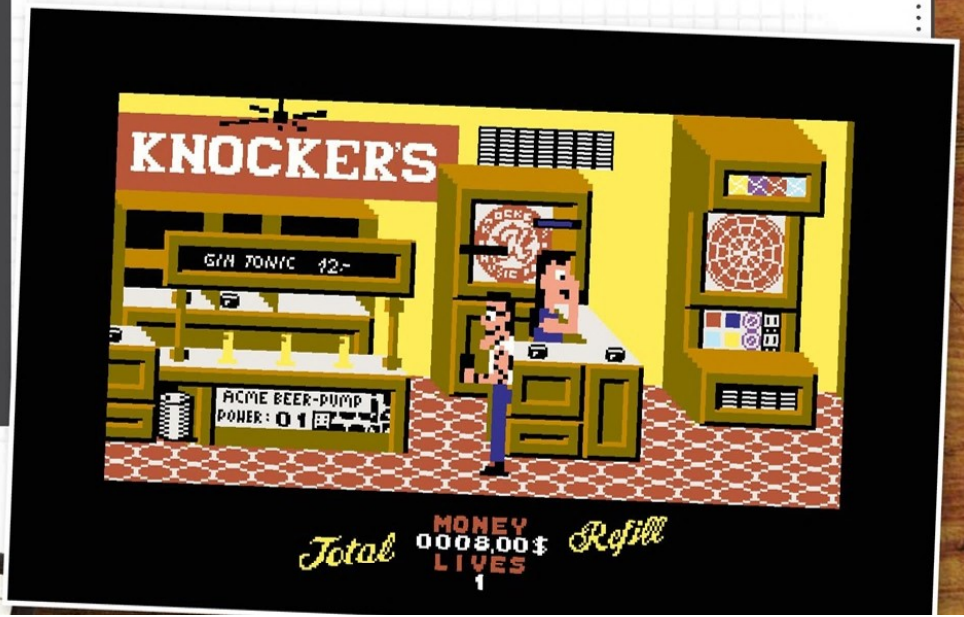
» [C64] Developer Stephan Katteneder really has the C64 in his crosshair.

How long did both games take to develop and who was involved?
That's hard to answer; I didn't keep track of that. I had no clue how a game is made, so I just started hacking away on my old laptop. Big mistake, by the way: a rough estimation is 200 hours for *TCBS* and about twice as much for *TR*, testing not included. I got lost too much in detail I guess. Saul Cross delivered sound and music at an intimidating speed once he got on board, then Trevor Storey and Kenz of publisher Psytronik turned the whole thing into a product.

***TCBS* supports mouse input, was that difficult to implement?**
I had no idea how they worked, but felt that a shooting game like *TCBS* needed mouse support. After some research and experimentation, I found an example for a C64 mouse driver online. Some modifications of that (buggy) example code later, I finally got it to work but could not limit the crosshair at the left side of the screen. Everything else worked just fine and it took me a while to find out what caused the overflow and a solution, but I bet there is a more elegant way of doing it.

How has the C64 gaming community responded ?
RGNs showcase video has only thumbs up so far, this is a friendly community. No one is just waiting to get a chance to bash a new developer. I guess most retro gamers know how much work it is to get something done in assembly language on an old system.

Finally, have you got any future plans our readers might be interested in?
There is a new game evolving right now, and all the things I learned during the making of my first two will go into it. With a full-time job, it's hard to estimate when it will be ready. I don't like the idea of putting videos of development stages online so there will be nothing to see before I am done with it.



DO YOU REMEMBER?

Atari ST-owning shoot-'em-up fans looking for something new in 1990 might have stumbled across *Exodus*, a multidirectionally scrolling blaster which was distributed by PD purveyor Budgie UK. The gameplay sees the player's spaceship tasked with destroying all of the enemies within each stage before warping on to the next.

All of the required targets for the current stage are shown on a scanner in the status area – similar to the coin-op shooter *Bosconian* – although some of them are mobile and need to be chased down while simultaneously dealing with the airborne nasties, weaving between bullets and occasionally taking out homing missiles.

Pilots with quick reactions and itchy trigger fingers will want to blast off to give these enemies a serious kicking. Fly your ship to Kikstart.me.uk/exodus-st.

» [Atari ST] If in doubt, it's a good idea to just run away.

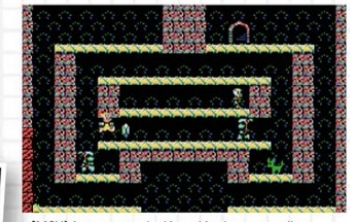
» [Atari ST] Taking down a cluster of rail-based enemies while avoiding bullets.

NIGHT KNIGHT

retro GAMER SWALLER

» **PLATFORM:** MSX » **DEVELOPER:** JUAN J MARTÍNEZ » **DOWNLOAD:** KIKSTART.ME.UK/NIGHT-KNIGHT-MSX » **PRICE:** FREE DOWNLOAD, € 35 (CARTRIDGE)

» [MSX] Most of the stage is done, so time to fill the last edges.



» [MSX] A very pretty-looking, shiny bonus to collect on the way out.

Sir Bernard is an old knight who was cursed by an evil witch, but rather than developing a taste for human blood or having to obsessively watch daytime television – it's hard to know which would be more distressing – he instead has problems with sleeping and needs to take a long walk before being able to nod off. A quick saunter before bed doesn't sound particularly bad, but having to do so every night regardless of the weather is starting to get to the poor guy, so his friend the Sorceress does a little research and finds a potential loophole: if Bernard roams all eighty rooms of Scarkeep Castle there's a possibility that this evil insomnia curse will be broken.

Clearing each room of the castle involves walking over all of the floor tiles, changing their colour in the process to show which have been visited and releasing a key which can then be used to unlock the door to the next area. Making that task more difficult are nightmarish creatures which roam the castle's rooms. To begin with there are just simple old undead creatures that you have to avoid, and they're not particularly bright. Nastier and more persistent enemies appear over time, however, including predatory werewolves and vampires or wizards who can undo Bernard's progress.

There's a 60-second timer ticking down to worry about, but letting it expire will only lose the player a life and there's a couple of bonus items which can appear during play which either pause or reset the clock. The lives counter can also be topped up by scoring 10,000 points and another useful item is the shield which allows our hero to take two hits from patrolling enemies before death rather than just one.

Night Knight has cute graphics with lots of colour that are accompanied by a jolly in-game soundtrack; it also puts up a solid challenge with some devious level designs and sneaky enemies but, while 80 stages might seem a little overwhelming, each has a password available from the pause menu for those wanting to take a shortcut.

>> Score **92%**

FUZ

» **PLATFORM:** PICO-8
» **DEVELOPER:** JUSIV » **PRICE:** FREE
» **DOWNLOAD:** KIKSTART.ME.UK/FUZ-PICO8

» [PICO-8] Some day we could just walk past a Fez? Never going to happen.

When the warp gate he's just materialised through is damaged, a fez-wearing creature called Gomez finds himself stranded. The world that he now inhabits is weird in that while Gomez exists in two dimensions, everything can be rotated around him, allowing otherwise inaccessible parts of the map to be reached.

The first task is to gather eight cube bits and, while seven of them are easily picked up, lateral thinking and some observational skills are necessary to get the eighth. Finishing this task leads to the repair of the warp gate but does Gomez really want to just leave?

This is a demade love letter to *Fez* which replicates the platform-based action and visual style. It also dishes out puzzles with some being more obvious than others and, while it might be petite, there's plenty to see and do for gamers who like a mental challenge alongside their platforming action.

>> Score **87%**

» [PICO-8] So here's something unexpected: a mysterious floating cube.

SC0TB0T

» **PLATFORM:** ZX SPECTRUM
» **DEVELOPER:** DOUGIE MCG » **PRICE:** NAME YOUR PRICE DOWNLOAD
» **DOWNLOAD:** KIKSTART.ME.UK/SC0TB0T-SPEC

The Loch Ness Monster has had enough of humans ruining the loch's atmosphere with their cameras, and has decided to go on the offensive. That means calling on all of the other Scottish beasties, including the Selkie and Kelpie, to drive the Scots from their homeland. This doesn't sit well with the people of Scotland, so the Sc0tb0t is created and tasked with taking out these threats.

Sc0tb0t attacks his mission on a screen-by-screen basis, avoiding patrolling nasties while locating the key which unlocks the exit and any items which might be needed to defeat the more fearsome creatures. The mechanical wonder comes with nine lives, but losing one undoes most of its progress, and Nessie's minions have every intention of putting up a fight. Expect a difficult and sometimes frustrating ride.

>> Score **72%**

» [ZX Spectrum] The Kelpie has no vulnerabilities, so must be manoeuvred around.

ROUNDUP

The members of Elysium are fans of Ocean's *The Great Escape* for the C64 but felt that it ran too slowly. To improve it they dismantled the code, profiled it to see where the busiest parts were and used some free memory for optimisations. Would-be escapees can see if they dig this updated take and its extra features by tunnelling their way over to Kikstart.me.uk/great-escape-c64.

Staying with the C64, Michael Archer was responsible for several games during the platform's commercial lifespan, including *Nemesis The Warlock*, Atomic *Robokid* and *Alien 3*. He recently opened up a GitHub account and uploaded all of the source code he'd retained, along with some notes. It's neat glimpse into game dev from that era, find out more at Kikstart.me.uk/m-archer-source-c64.

BIOJET

» **PLATFORM:** AMIGA » **DEVELOPER:** ROY SCHNEIDER » **DOWNLOAD:** KIKSTART.ME.UK/BIOJET-AMIGA » **PRICE:** FREE

There's nothing that'll put a downer on your day like doing a little exploring of the underground tunnels on an unnamed world and getting separated from your spacecraft. That's pretty much where the star of *BioJet* finds himself and, now that he out, the automated security system has started up.

Each area is large and scrolls around the player as they move, so some care has to be taken in order to avoid getting lost. Along with patrolling enemies and moving hazards, there are doors which require a key to open and switches that must be pushed to clear previously closed routes.

Most players will find *BioJet* a bit too easy after they've acclimatised to the controls and collision detection, which is a shame because exploring the levels and solving puzzles is fun while it lasts but there isn't much replay value afterwards apart from aiming for a high score.

>> Score **70%**

» [Amiga] Press the large magic button to clear away some of the boulders.

HOW TO

QUICK GUIDES TO HELP YOU GET THE BEST FROM YOUR GAMES

DIFFICULTY

●○○○○

VERY LOW

FORMAT

» PC ENGINE

HANDY HINTS

» HuCard games are region-locked. You'll need an import adaptor to run Japanese games on American Turbografx systems, and both an import adapter and a mod are required to run American games on Japanese PC Engines.

» CD-ROM games have no region protection, so as long as you have an appropriate system card of any region, the game will run. However, the system cards themselves are region-locked just like HuCard games.

EQUIPMENT NEEDED

» Step-down converter for import consoles

» NTSC-capable television

BY THE NUMBERS

Which formats carry the most games?

- **HuCard:** 280
- **Supergrafx HuCard:** 5
- **CD-ROM2:** 120
- **Super CD-ROM2:** 255
- **Arcade CD-ROM2:** 12
- **LD-ROM2:** 11

HOW TO...

PLAY EVERY PC ENGINE GAME

NEC's diminutive console is a bit of a nightmare to buy for, as it has three CD-ROM formats, two different card formats and region issues to contend with. Alternatively, you could just wait for the PC Engine Mini…

01 The Supergrafx supports almost all licensed games for the system – with some work. It'll play every Japanese HuCard game by default, and is the only machine to support the Supergrafx titles. To play CD games, you'll need either the Super CD-ROM2 unit or the CD-ROM2 unit with an IFU-30 interface and an RAU-30 adaptor, plus appropriate system cards.

03 The PC Engine, PC Engine LT, CoreGrafx and CoreGrafx II all run HuCards. To run CD games, you can grab the Super CD-ROM2 unit that plays CD-ROM2 and Super CD-ROM2 games, so you'd only need an Arcade Card Duo or Game Express CD card for those games that require them. If you choose the CD-ROM2 and IFU-30 solution you'll need a system card.

02 The PC Engine Duo and Duo-R run most games out of the box, as they include a built-in version of Super System Card 3.0. Japanese HuCard games, CD-ROM2 and Super CD-ROM2 games all work. For Arcade CD-ROM2 games, you'll need an Arcade Card Duo. With a Games Express CD Card, you can also run some dodgy unlicensed adult gambling games.

04 US Turbografx-16 units run NA HuCard games, as do the PAL units that found their way to market. The only CD unit that fits the system is the American Turbografx CD add-on, which can run CD-ROM2 and Super CD-ROM2 games. If you're in a pinch, Japanese system cards will work through an import adapter.

Something you'd like to see a guide for? Contact us at:
RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag retrogamer@futurenet.com

ANY QUESTONS?

Q: What on earth is a System Card and do I need one?

A: The System Card 1.0, 2.0 and 2.1 will only play CD-ROM2 games. If you're desperate to play the CD-ROM2 version of Altered Beast, you'll need System Card 1.0 as that's the only one it works with.

Q: So what's so special about the Super System Card 3.0, then?

A: This will run CD-ROM2 and Super CD-ROM2 games, which covers most of the PC Engine CD library. The Super CD-ROM2, PC Engine Duo, PC Engine Duo-R and TurboDuo all have this built in.

Q: I see some PC Engine games require an Arcade Card? Do enough games use it so make it a worthwhile thing for me to buy?

A: Although only nine games require this, it does enhance others. CD-ROM2 and Turbografx CD units require Arcade Card Duo; Super CD-ROM2, PC Engine Duo, PC Engine Duo-R and TurboDuo use Arcade Card Pro.

"If you're in a pinch, Japanese system cards will work through an import adapter"

05 If money is no object, a Pioneer LaserActive with the PAC-N10 module will play HuCards, CD-ROM2 and Super CD-ROM2 games by default (this shows the MD variant). If you add an Arcade Card Duo or Games Express CD Card, it'll run those games too. It also runs the 11 LaserDisc-based LD-ROM2 games, which aren't available elsewhere.

YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED...

A selection of smaller questions from readers...

SMALL CHANGE

A how-to guide on how to buy a PC Engine would be great. I know you did an in-depth feature on the console a few months ago, but I still feel a little in the dark on the subtle differences in its product line!
John Paul Sutherland via Twitter

You are in luck, as these very pages will tell you the upgrade paths for each model. Other than that, the main knowledge you need concerns video. Most models will output composite video at 60Hz, which will work fine on the majority of television sets. The original white PC Engine and the North American Turbografx-16 will only output RF video, and it won't work on most UK televisions. However, RGB SCART mods are available, and any system with an expansion port to connect to CD-ROM hardware will also support video output add-ons like the Grafxbooster and Engine Block AV.

LOST IN TRANSLATION

Is *Galaga* pronounced 'gah-lay-gah' or 'gah-la-gah'?
Management Writes via Twitter

We can answer this question by looking at the original Japanese name of the game, as the language is phonetically consistent in a way that English isn't. The name is rendered ギャラガ ('Gyaraga') in Japanese. The key bit to pay attention to is the 'ra' part which points towards the latter of your choices, also the Japanese 'ra' sounds like something in between an English 'ra' and 'la'. If it were 'gah-lay-gah' you would expect to see レイ('rei'), as found in the likes of *RayStorm* (レイストーム) and *Professor Layton* (レイトン教授).

'MGGA'?

How to make games great again?
No0B GamerX via Twitter

This is unnecessary because, yes, games were great and they still are great. The games you used to love haven't changed at all, and excellent new games are released every year. Now, that does come with a caveat – there's plenty of great stuff coming out for consoles you can buy brand new, and very little for the Atari Lynx (long-term Lynx owners may observe that this has been true for about 30 years). Likewise, open world action adventure games are everywhere you look right now, and few developers are making single-screen platform games. So while gaming is great today, it may not be a great time for the games you like to play. If that's the case, we'd advise you to learn to code, or wait for the games you like to come back in style.

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

READERS TAKE US THROUGH **THE RETRO KEYHOLE**

SEGA TERADRIVE
"A Retro Man Cave Discord member named DeChief sent a link to the system on Yahoo Japan Auctions. I looked for a few seconds then knew I had to have it."
PAID: "a lot"

FM TOWNS
"Another system I knew nothing about but had to have. I was lucky to find a BEEP refurbed system on import and have cuddled it ever since."
PAID: "a lot"

ARCADE CABINET
"This is something I had to have and purchased as a custom build with a carbon fibre wrap, all the controller inputs and a lightgun attached to the back."
PAID: £2,000

KEEPER OF THE EXOTIC

Gary Pinkett had a impressive hoard of overseas oddities

BIO

NAME: Gary Pinkett

FAVOURITE SYSTEM: Atari ST

LOCATION: Somerset

ESTIMATED VALUE: "I honestly have no idea, thousands I would have thought. I buy out of love so I tend to push the numbers out of my mind."

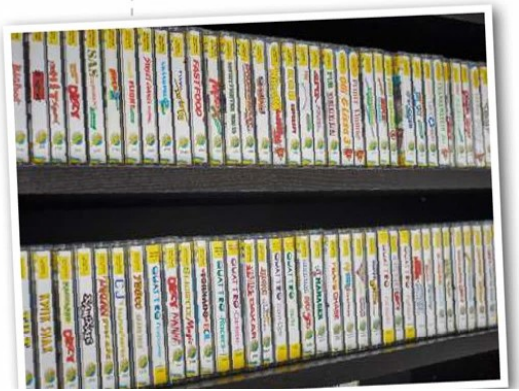
TWITTER: @STompyRR

This month's collector is a home computer fan with a penchant for exotic imports. Gary Pinkett's first love was the ZX Spectrum +2 and he moved on to an Atari ST, but he ultimately got rid of all of it during his first serious relationship. Still, it wasn't possible to keep him away for good. "I started collecting again between three and four years ago," he explains. "During a visit to my regular comic shop in town I was asked if I wanted to buy a load of Atari ST and Amiga games, to which I instantly said yes. The nostalgia bug had bit me before I even realised." He soon set his first collecting goal, which he's tantalisingly close to achieving. "Soon after, I decided to try and get all the ZX Spectrum Codemasters budget games as I figured it would be easily achievable. *Wrong*! I still have one left, *DJ Puff*, which I don't seem to be able to find for love nor money!"

Gary's collecting habit soon moved beyond nostalgia, as he began to explore the less-documented world of Japanese computers. "I was talking to my good friend Andrew Dalton on The Retro Man Cave's discord channel where we were discussing Cinemaware games. I happened to recall *The King Of Chicago* with fond memories which made me randomly query to myself, 'What other systems did this come out for?' Looking through the list I saw the Sharp X68000 which I had never heard of and after some Googling I knew I had to have one." Part of the appeal is the gorgeous look of the games. "I was lucky enough to be given two boxed games with it two which were two of the most shelf-worthy boxes I had cast eyes upon. I need more, I wanted more… I started buying up lots from Yahoo! Japan to amass my collection. Everything Japanese is so much more exotic in my humble opinion."

According to Gary, collecting for Japanese computer systems is not too hard but it is expensive (he admits to the charge of "more money than sense"). As a result, he's had to find ways to optimise his spending. "I would recommend buying some lots or a load of games from Yahoo! Auctions Japan using Buyee or a similar proxy service, and letting them build up over a month before paying about £10 for protective packaging (this is a must!) and sending them on the slow boat where shipping costs are the cheapest (I've waited three months for delivery) to maximise the gain on your spend."

Of course, practical realities sometimes kick in and one particular issue has caused Gary to switch his retro collecting focus for the time being. "I don't actually have any boxed FM Towns games, I would love to start collecting them too, but for the moment I'm pretty much out of space, and I would like to build up my PlayStation and Saturn collection a bit right now," he tells us. But with the switch towards consoles comes the thrill of a new hunt – something that we can all relate to. "I have been



Got an impressive collection of your own? Contact us at:
RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag retrogamer@futurenet.com

SHARP X68000 PRO
"An exotic I never knew existed but then dreamed about. My Pro has been recapped, has a UK PSU fitted and boasts 6MB of RAM."
PAID: £800

JEWEL IN THE CROWN

ATARI FALCON

"Previously owned by a musician and kept under a dust proof cover for most of its life, and it shows! I wanted one desperately as a kid so this was a must for my collection."

PAID: £600

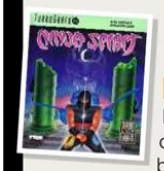
dragging my better half, Rachel, around to various retro gaming shops nearby picking up those games where the prices don't seem to be absolutely crazy money yet. Hopefully this will continue for a few more months until I have got all the ones that are causing an itch!" ✱

BARGAIN HUNT

Your guide to the rising world of retro prices

THE COVER STAR GAME BOY

There are plenty of options if you want to start playing Nintendo's classic handheld line. The original model Game Boy and the Game Boy Pocket will normally set you back **£20** or more, with considerable premiums for boxed systems and certain hardware colours – for example, the original grey system is more commonly **£40**. The Japan-only Game Boy Light will cost you considerably more, around **£90-£100** for a loose system.



NINJA SPIRIT

Irem's arcade action game is either very cheap or rather pricey depending on your format, with no middle ground. The home computer conversions by Activision can typically be had for under **£5** boxed, but the excellent PC Engine version starts at **£50** for the US version, and prices of **£75** or more are common for the Japanese release.

SUPER ADVENTURE ISLAND

Hudson's nifty platform game sits at the more reasonable end of the SNES price range, with unboxed copies going for **£6-£12** regardless of which region you want. We've seen boxed copies go for a wider range of **£15-£35** – as always with games in cardboard boxes, the price you'll pay can vary massively depending on condition.

ALIEN TRILOGY

If you fancy taking on the Xenomorphs of this tie-in, there are some reasonable options. The PC release is the most expensive of the bunch at around **£20**, and the PlayStation is the cheapest at **£4-£10**. The Saturn version is a little pricier, ranging from **£5-£15** with the manual.

HOW MUCH?!

FINAL FANTASY VII AND VIII

We weren't prepared to see a listing where someone bought both of these games for **£220**. Both were regular PAL copies, with *FFVII* being the Platinum version and *FFVIII* having a crack on the front of the case, and neither was sealed.

Prices correct at time of print

MAILBAG

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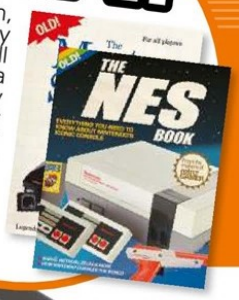

STAR LETTER

CLUB RETRO

Dear **Retro Gamer**,
I am a senior lecturer in Computer Science at the University Of Wolverhampton, where I have created a retro gaming club. The aim is for students to enjoy themselves, relax and mingle with each other... after all, what better ice-breaker than a four-player game of *GoldenEye*? The club was built on almost zero budget, scavenging screens from around the building, and relying on loans and donations of games and consoles from students and colleagues (okay, mostly me). I insist on providing an authentic experience, so real hardware only! We met four times this academic year, played on ten classic consoles, had very loud four-player tournaments with prizes provided by local sponsors. Feedback from students ranges from "we should do this more often" to "it's exactly what I needed to get my mind off all the assignments". I thought I would share this success story, which is yet more evidence that retro games are fun and inclusive, bridge age barriers and bring people from different backgrounds together.
Cheers,
Alix Bergeret

What a brilliant and heartwarming story, Alix. This passion and dedication to retro gaming needs to be rewarded. Send us your address and we'll throw some books your way. Hopefully that should give everyone something to read between games.

» We can't think of a better way to meet someone than over a slappers-only game of *GoldenEye*.

» Are there any talented coders out there that can make Andrew's dream of an updated ZX Spectrum classic a reality?

» [Mega Drive] Greg is upset about the Mega Drive Mini's lack of *Devil Crash MD*, and Darran is, too.

CRUSHED ABOUT CRASH

Dear **Retro Gamer**,
I've just seen the news about the Mega Drive Mini and I couldn't be more upset. It's great to see 42 games are being included, but where's *Devil Crash MD*? It's an amazing game and it seems ridiculous that it hasn't been included. I lost hours to it, and I was hoping against hope that it was going to be included in the final ten games. Please, please, *please* can you run an Ultimate Guide on the game? It's the only thing that will now cheer me up.
Regards,
Greg Jacobs

You're not the only one upset, Greg. Darran was also hoping that Technosoft's exceptional port would make the cut, but it clearly wasn't to be. Hopefully it will pop up on the new PC Engine Mini.

HORSING AROUND

Hi all at **Retro Gamer**,
I am loving the magazine. I used to really enjoy the horse racing game *Derby Day* on ZX Spectrum. This was a game the whole family could enjoy at Christmas, and even my grandfather enjoyed (or seemed to pretend, at least) putting a virtual fiver on a Spectrum-generated horse such as Red Rum 48K, while enjoying a small whisky.

Since all of our skills as gamers are a bit weaker now, I implore some young whippersnapper programmer to develop a '*Derby Day Flash*' game. This could be put on the **Retro Gamer** website and would use original ZX Spectrum graphics, and the original Spectrum 'thud-thud' horse hoof sounds. The only prize is position in leaderboard (wins versus losses), which would allow the retro gaming community to all have a go. How about it?
Andrew Masters

Thanks for the idea Andrew. We're not sure how well it would work on the website, but we do love the idea of it. Maybe someone could recreate the game for the Homebrew section?

MUSIC MUSINGS

Dear **Retro Gamer**,
In Load 194 you asked what readers would like to see on the next cover CD. As someone who only owned a Spectrum back in the day I feel I missed most of the reference points for the two CDs of reworked C64 music. While it was pleasant enough, I've not been tempted to play either disc again.

I've heard amazing rock and metal covers on YouTube of classic chiptune tracks where most readers will know the original. I'm talking about Aki Järvinen's *Golden Axe*, Sebdoom's epic *Streets Of Rage*; and there are dozens by Ferd K alone; from *Double Dragon* to *Bloodstained: Ritual Of The Night*. Many of these tracks are not available to buy, and MP3 rips sound tinny. So how about something like this for the next CD?
Robin Tucker

Thanks for the suggestion Robin. We're always looking for new CD ideas, but licensing can be a big problem. You've given us some

» Robin would love a CD of remixed Spectrum chiptunes. What are you interested in? Write in and let us know.

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food for thought, and you're right that there's some fantastic music being showcased on YouTube.

ZOMBIESSSSS

Dear **Retro Gamer**,
One of my favourite games of all time is a SNES classic by LucasArts called *Zombies Ate My Neighbours*. I completed it on its original release (thanks to the password system) and regularly return to it today. Sadly, I don't believe you have covered the game in any way, so I'd really appreciate it if you could offer some behind-the-scenes insight into it. It really does deserve the coverage.
Yours,
Daniel Baker

Funnily enough, Darran is looking to add *Zombies* to his own SNES collection and he's actually been looking at getting a big feature into the magazine (perhaps an Ultimate Guide). In the meantime you've hopefully enjoyed last issue's selection of Classic Moments.

WTH?

Dear **Retro Gamer** guys,
I am a massive fan of your magazine and have just started my subscription. I just have one tiny issue, though. I know that you use common abbreviations for some types of games and I know what they are, but there are many I don't understand and there is nothing worse than reading a great article and an abbreviation is chucked in and you have no idea what it means. It has proved an annoyance and I wonder if there is anything you can do such as tell us in brackets after its used the first time? Thanks very much and keep up the amazing work.
Yours Sincerely,
Kevin Courtenay

Thanks for writing in, Kevin. Keeping the language accessible is something we typically strive to do, but this has clearly slipped through the net. Leave it with us.

» [Mega Drive] We're big fans of *Zombies*, so we'll try and sort out a making of for a later issue.

DISCUSSED THIS MONTH

"Magical Christmas Land"

Konami's surprise PC Engine Mini (or Core Grafx) announcement is all we've been talking about this issue. Darran is waiting for a *Devil Crash* announcement, Drew wants to know just how small it actually is, while Nick keeps repeating "my magical Christmas Land prediction has come true" over and over again.

» [PC Engine] We're excited about the PC Engine Mini, so here's *Lords Of Thunder*, another game we want on it.

Your say

Every month, Retro Gamer asks a question on social media and prints the best replies. This month we wanted to know…

What PC Engine Mini games are you hoping for and why?

Graham Plowman
Air Zonk! A cartoony visual feast and a great shoot-'em-up to boot. It's hard, and really shows how the PC Engine was able to push so many sprites around the screen with ease.

Dale Muir
Castlevania: Rondo Of Blood, seeing as you can no longer purchase it from the Wii Shop Channel.

Drvnken Master
Devil Crash, one of the best pinball games outside the Amiga in the Nineties!

@atariman72
Power Drift! Would love to see *Chase HQ* and *Out Run* as well, but think that's less likely. And *Bomberman* of course.

BennyTheGreek
All of the timed caravan shooters. Some of the best shooters on any console.

junkmale
Ys and *Ys II*. Never played either. Always wanted to.

Ely
Galaga 88 for me, it looked arcade perfect – and I loved playing it in the arcade.

Mark Paterson
Bomberman '94. One of my favourite games of all time. If you don't smile when playing it, then you are soulless.

» [PC Engine] *Castlevania: Rondo Of Blood* certainly has its fans and rightly so.

Rob Taylor
Can somebody please finally translate the *Cyber City Oedo* 808 adventure and plonk it on there?

Andrea Porta
Winds Of Thunder, the first time I read about killer application. Not to mention the soundtrack, my god my ears are still bleeding!

@Trickytoon
Bomberman '93, *Blazing Lasers* and I'll be a happy camper.

BennyTheGreek
Terra Cresta: the two-min version – played that for a few hours last night – and as its being sorted out by Konami, I would hope its a given that *Parodius Da* will be there.

retro GAMER

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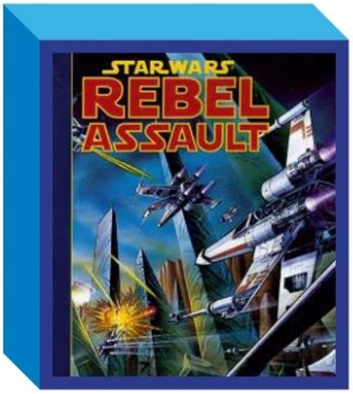


STAR WARS: REBEL ASSAULT

» A few issues ago, we captioned a screenshot of Star Trek: Bridge Commander and jokingly called the Enterprise the Millennium Falcon. Some were concerned that this was a genuine mistake, so we've put together something that should prove our thorough knowledge of *Star Wars* and re-establish our credibility with the sci-fi hardcore. So without further ado, let's skip to the end…

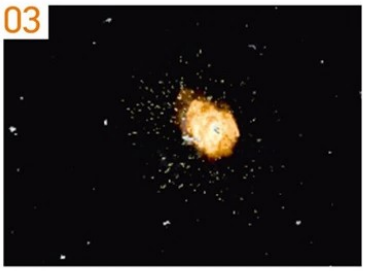
01

» As the Rebel Alliance's only hope of victory, it falls to our hero to save the day. On the advice of the spirit of his deceased master, Obi-Wan Kenobi, he disables his targeting computer and uses the Force to guide him.

02

» Having successfully deposited a photon torpedo in the exhaust port of the Borg Cube, the mission is complete and the galaxy is saved. The Enterprise flies away, allowing its crew to live long and prosper. (Well, probably not the redshirts.)

03



» And just so we don't miss it, here's the explosion to prove that everything definitely did go to plan, and we won't get any sort of sequel-enabling shenanigans. Man, the Cylons are going to be massively unhappy about this.

04

» Oh look, here's Dark Helmet, right on cue. Predictably he's quite perturbed, and vows that the next time you meet, he'll defeat you. With that grave warning he disappears, and you have to assume that he'll be upgrading Spaceball 1 and spending some time perfecting his mastery of the Schwartz.

05

» Back on Gallifrey, a massive victory presentation is arranged by the Rylan Star League. Shinji Ikari, the brave captain who defeated the enemy Gundam units and ended the Dilgar War, receives the Ellen Ripley award for bravery. (Are we sure this is right? Drew, please fact-check this rigorously – Ed.)

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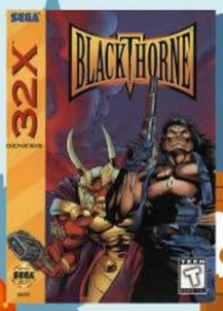

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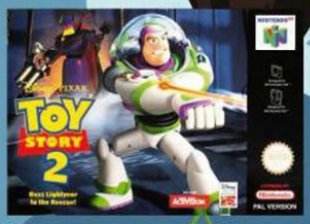

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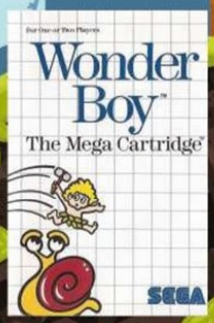

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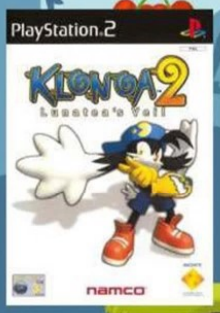

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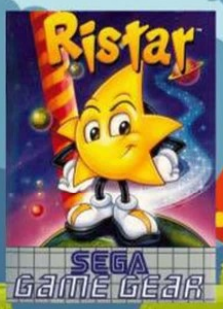

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50 YEARS OF FUN

I spent most of my formative years either growing up in my local arcades or delving into the world of import gaming thanks to my Mega Drive and Super Nintendo. As a result, my relationship with Konami games goes back decades. I have enjoyed early arcade classics such as *Frogger*, *Amidar* and *Track & Field* and embraced the company's many, many shooters. *Scramble*, *Gradius*, *Salamander*, *Thunder Cross II*, *Xexex* and *Axelay* all have special places in my heart, while I grew up on excellent Konami franchises such as *Contra* and *Castlevania*.

The company, for me, personally was pretty much untouchable during the 16-bit and 32-bit eras of gaming and it's here that the developer arguably put out some of its strongest games. Hideo Kojima was becoming a rising talent in the company, the likes of *Pro Evolution Soccer* and *Metal Gear Solid* evolved spectacularly during this period, while new IP like *Suikoden* and *Silent Hill* captured the imagination of gamers the world over.

It's rather pleasing, then, to be able to put together this delightful little tome of essential Konami games to celebrate the company's recent 50th anniversary. It's an exhaustive collection of the team's favourite games and we'd argue that they're the first titles you should consider picking up if you're planning to explore Konami's heritage in a little more depth

Enjoy the booklet!

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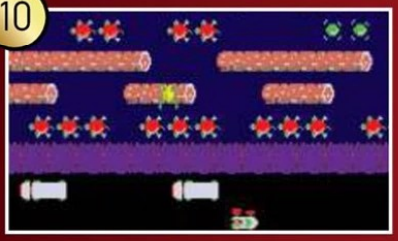

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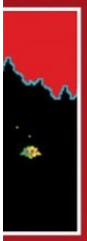

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» [PlayStation] *Metal Gear Solid* blazed a trail for complex and cinematic stories in videogames.

METAL GEAR SOLID

A WORLD DRIPPING **WITH TENSION**

PLAYSTATION, PC, 1998

There's so much that can be said about Solid Snake's return to the gaming world after almost a decade on the sidelines. For a start, there's the quality of the game – every aspect of it is polished to perfection. The level of graphical detail is extraordinary, with the developers even remembering to show Snake's breath in the cold Alaskan air, while just about every gamer can identify the distinctive alert sound that tells you that you've been spotted. The game's dialogue is eminently quotable, too, thanks to the memorable performances by David Hayter and the rest of the talented voice cast.

Of course, then there's the actual experience of playing the game. The stealth action makes sense – guards are attracted by sounds and lured by footprints, and you can take advantage of that. But what sets the game apart is a hallmark of Hideo Kojima's productions at Konami, which is the number of clever ideas from out of left field. The use of ketchup to escape a jail cell is one thing, but the way the game integrates its own physical packaging and the physical console itself into the game experience is quite another, as anybody who was spooked by Psycho Mantis' knowledge of their gaming history will tell you. The team set out to

EMPTY THE ARMOURY

It's always best to avoid a fight in Metal Gear Solid, but when combat is the only option, these are the tools at Snake's disposal

SOCOM

■ The first weapon you acquire is a basic handgun. It has a 12-round capacity, and can be upgraded with a suppressor.

FA-MAS

■ This is a fully automatic assault rifle. It's loud, so you'll only want to use it when enemies are already on alert.

PSG1

■ When you need to take out enemies from afar, this sniper rifle is useful. Make sure to take some Diazepam, or your aim will be off.

CHAFF GRENADE

■ This particular type of grenade disables nearby electronics – including your own radar system.

STUN GRENADE

■ It won't kill anybody, but this grenade can disorientate foes and buy you some time in a gunfight.

GRENADE

■ Pull the pin, throw it far away and watch as it explodes five seconds later. It's not subtle, but it's definitely effective.

C4

■ This plastic explosive can be affixed to surfaces and detonated by remote control. It's good fun to use if you like setting up traps.

CLAYMORE

■ As a proximity mine, the Claymore's explosion is triggered when a hapless victim walks too close to it.

NIKITA

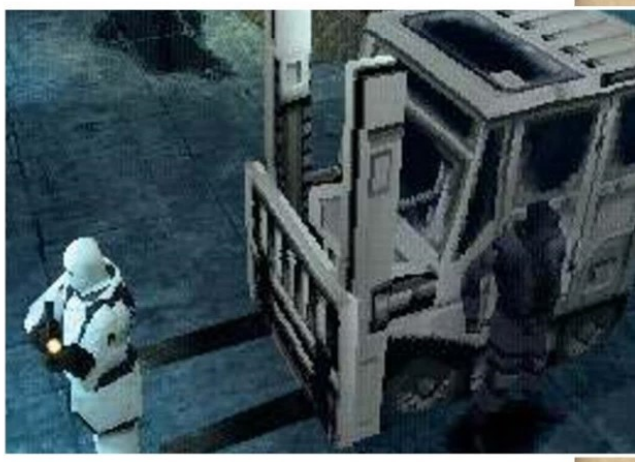
■ The remote-controlled Nikita missile is useful for destroying electronic devices and patrolmen in areas Snake can't enter.

STINGER

■ These missiles are your weapon of choice when raw power is needed. Point the launcher at the target, lock on and fire.

make the greatest PlayStation game ever, and there's definitely a case to be made that it succeeded.

Finally, there's the way that *Metal Gear Solid* influenced other games. It was one of the best examples of cinematic storytelling in a videogame to date, without any need for the prerendered FMV scenes that were still in vogue at the time, and plenty of developers picked up a trick or two after seeing it. Plus it was the leading light of 1998's stealth game revival, overshadowing not only contemporaries like *Tenchu* and *Thief*, but becoming the benchmark by which later games, such as *Headhunter* and *Splinter Cell*, were measured.



THE SIMPSONS

SPRINGFIELD'S FINEST **STREET FIGHTER**

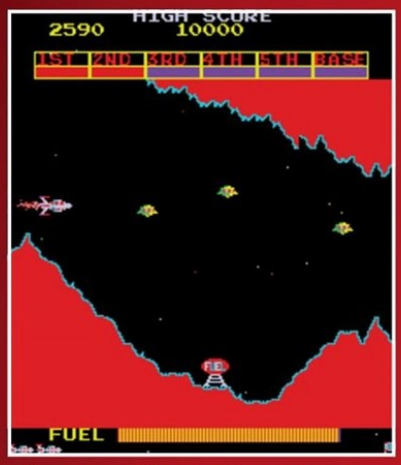
ARCADE, VARIOUS, 1991

Konami created some incredible scrolling fighters throughout the late Eighties and early Nineties, and *The Simpsons* represents the company at its creative best. Like *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* before it, *The Simpsons* does a wonderful job of capturing the cartoon's distinctive look and it's filled with plenty of nods to the classic TV series (which was then in its third season).

Mechanically it's similar to other scrolling fighters from Konami, so there's an attack button and a jump button, and pressing both together creates a stronger super attack. The big difference here, however, is that family members are able to team up to pull off stronger moves (which change depending on the combination of characters).

Despite the popularity of the game on release it was only converted to the C64 and MS-DOS formats. It was eventually re-released by Electronic Arts for Xbox 360 and PS3, but sadly, those versions have long been delisted, meaning the arcade original is your best option.

» [Arcade] Each member of the iconic family gets their hands dirty, even lovable Lisa.



» [Arcade] *Scramble* really helped define the shoot-'em-up genre back in 1981.

SCRAMBLE

AGAINST **ALL ODDS**

ARCADE, VARIOUS, 1981

While there's a lot of confusion over whether *Scramble* kickstarted started the *Gradius* franchise, there's no confusion over its quality. While many games from *Scramble*'s time period featured a lone fighter facing off against an enemy invasion, few felt as structured as *Scramble* did. The ever-scrolling stages change through six different environments, which helps to enforce the enormity of your mission. While there's plenty of shooting in *Scramble*, you'll also need good reflexes to avoid rockets, which lay dormant until you're in their path. There's also an ever-dwindling supply of fuel, which needs to be topped up by blowing up fuel tanks (don't ask).

Scramble presents a constant challenge, particularly when you have to deal with low-flying comets and difficult skyscraper layouts, but it never feels unfair. Like *The Simpsons*, its huge popularity in the arcades didn't lead to many home conversions, but it does crop up on numerous compilations, including the recently released *Arcade Classics Collection*.

SUNSET RIDERS

ROOTIN' TOOTIN' **COWBOY SHOOTIN'**

ARCADE, VARIOUS, 1991

***Sunset Riders* is a nice over-the-top alternative to the *Contra* series.** They're both run-and-guns at heart, but *Sunset Riders* amps everything up, nicking mechanics from the likes of *Shinobi* and *Rolling Thunder* and throwing in some ridiculously vibrant graphics for good measure.

Teaming up with up to three other players, you're required to take out bounties on opponents that range from a knife-throwing Native American, to a dapper gunslinger.

There's a strong selection of power-ups to discover, alongside plenty of variety to its stages.

While it was ported to both the Mega Drive and Super Famicom, all versions tend to fetch a pretty penny on eBay. It's a title that's crying out for a re-release.

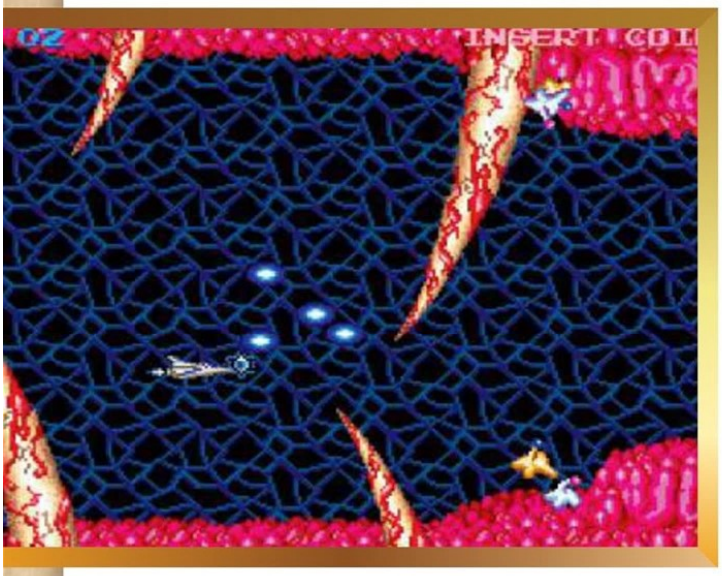
» [Arcade] Its hard to not get swept up in *Sunset Riders*' gunslinging Wild West action.

SILENT SCOPE

TAKE A **LONG SHOT**

ARCADE, VARIOUS, 1999

This is an arcade gun game with a difference. The vast majority of the time the main screen will display a single, very distant view of a terrorist incident in progress. Your job is to take out the bad guys, who you see in much more detail by looking down the scope of your sniper rifle – quite literally, as the mounted gun peripheral on the arcade cabinet includes its own dedicated tiny display, a feature which home conversions struggled to replicate.



SALAMANDER

MAD **MASH**

ARCADE, VARIOUS, 1986

After the success of *Gradius*, this spin-off made some big changes to the formula. Out went the selection bar, to be replaced with standard power-ups, and gameplay switched between horizontally scrolling stages and newly introduced vertical stages. Considerably more organic enemies were added to the game, and the American version (titled *Life Force*) went the whole hog, changing the setting to the infected innards of an alien. This was then bizarrely ported back to Japan.

GTI CLUB: RALLY CÔTE D'AZUR

MINI **MAYHEM**

ARCADE, 1996

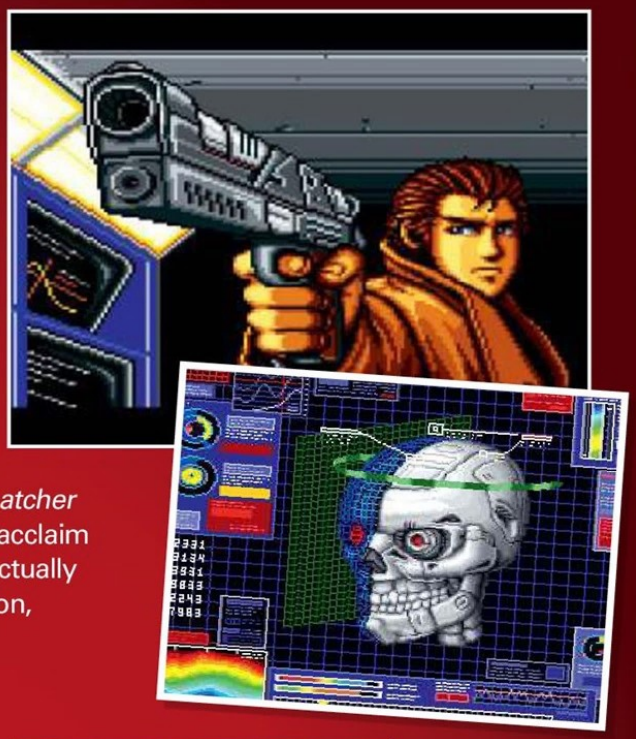
While running supercars ragged around closed circuits is fun, there's just as much fun to be had bombing up and down hills in a Mini Cooper, and that's the terror you can bring to the residents of a sleepy French Riviera village in *GTI Club*. The single location of Konami's arcade racer hosts a variety of different tracks as well as many shortcuts, so knowledge of the side streets – as well as a fair amount of skill with the handbrake – is the key to victory. *GTI Club* was successful enough to spawn two more arcade instalments, followed by a PS3 game in 2008.

SNATCHER

BUILT TO **LAST**

NEC PC-88, VARIOUS, 1988

Hideo Kojima's cyberpunk graphic adventure borrows more than a little from *Blade Runner*, but with results like this it would be churlish to complain. The player directs Gillian Seed through investigation scenes and target-shooting sections, as he investigates the menace of body-stealing robots in Neo Kobe. *Snatcher* wasn't a great commercial hit but gained critical acclaim and a cult audience, and it might be cheaper to actually learn Japanese than buy the rare Mega-CD version, which is the only one available in English.



INTERNATIONAL SUPERSTAR SOCCER '98

IT'S COMING HOME **(AGAIN)**

N64, 1998

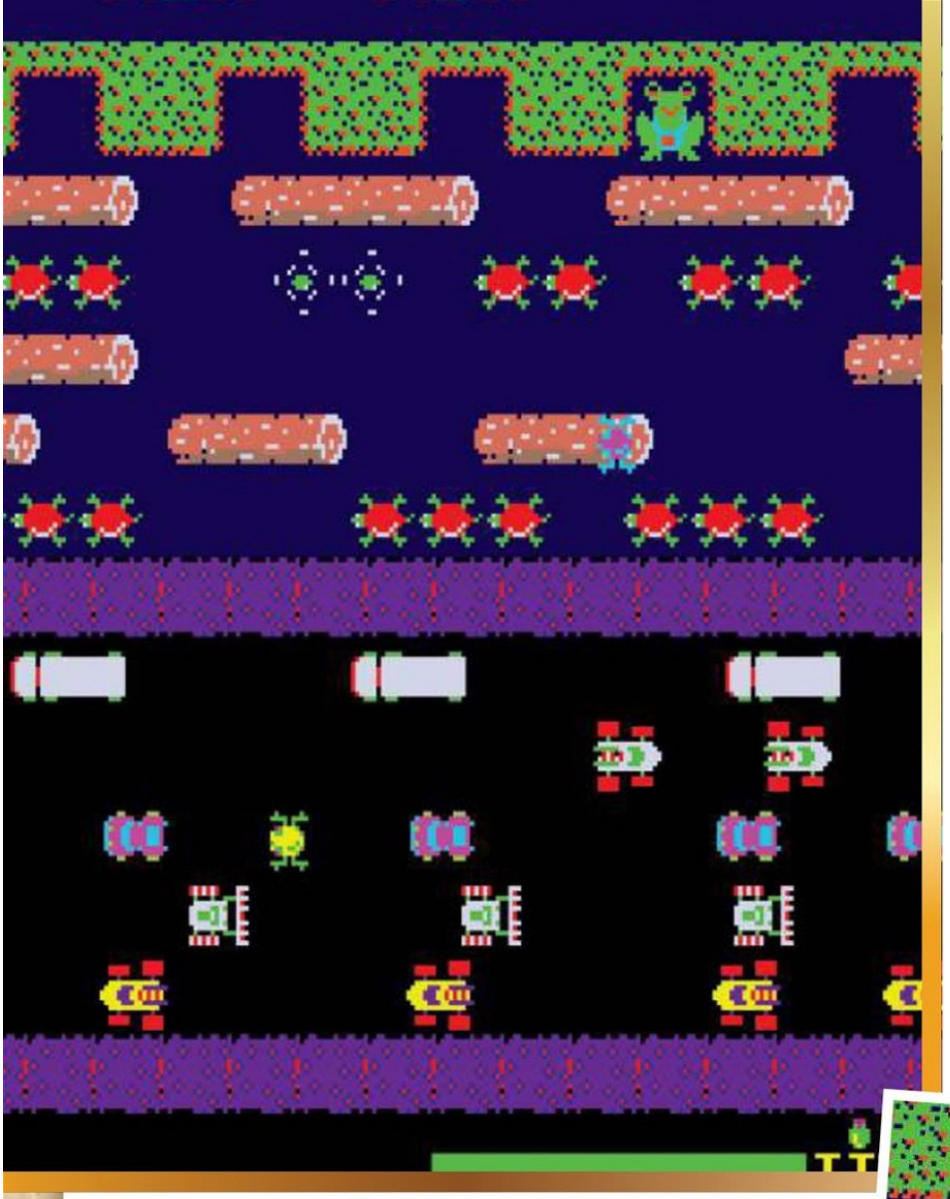
Konami put its best foot forward with this instalment of its football franchise. It wasn't too different to its excellent predecessor, but given that it was in a different league to its competitors anyway, that was no bad thing. Plus, it did improve things a little by including extra animations and presentational touches.

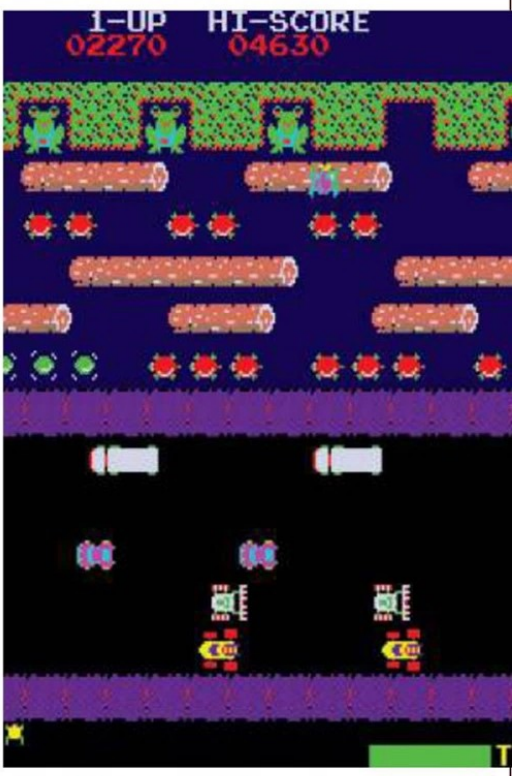
BUCKY O'HARE

HIGH **STAKES**

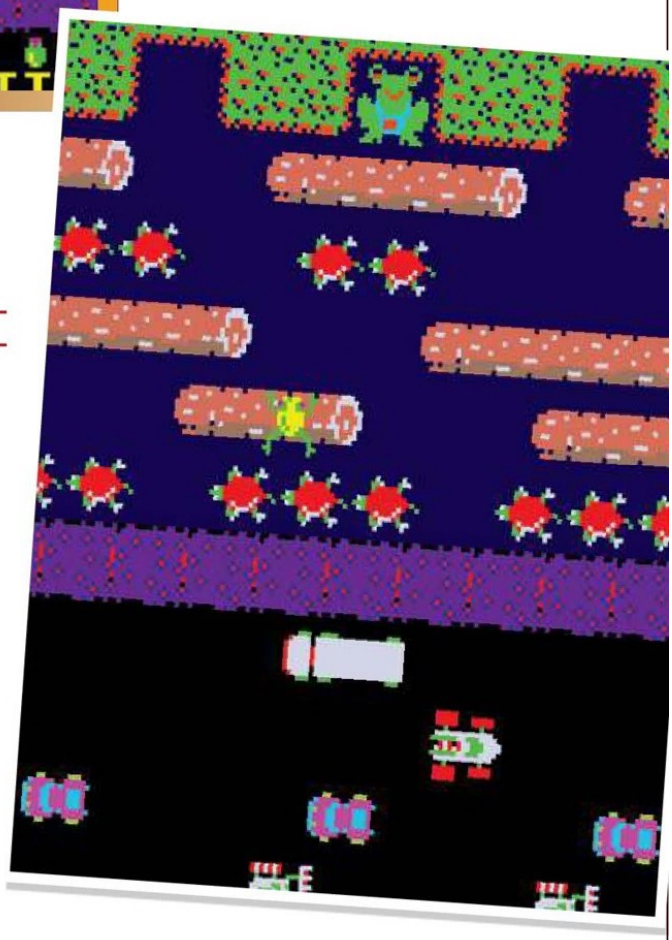
NES, 1992

Comic adaptation *Bucky O'Hare* hit TV screens in the early Nineties, and Konami managed to get a couple of really good games out of its brief time in the sun. The arcade beat-'em-up is good but we really like this NES platformer – it takes after the *Mega Man* games, as you can tackle the stages in any order and rescue characters with new abilities. It's technically impressive, too, as you'd expect from a game directed by future Treasure founder Masato Maegawa.





» [Arcade] The concept behind *Frogger* is a strange one for a videogame, sure, but there's no denying that it's a true arcade classic.



FROGGER

HOP **TO IT**

ARCADE, VARIOUS, 1981

When you think about the first arcade games to feature distinctive characters, it's clear that *Frogger* can stand proudly alongside the likes of *Pac-Man* and *Donkey Kong* as a pioneering game. Like so many of those early hits, it was easy to learn and hard to master, too – all you needed was a four-way joystick to get *Frogger* home alive, but the hazards on the road and river made that a challenge.

In an era where shoot-'em-ups dominated the videogaming world, *Frogger* was an unusual game. While there was an element of danger, in the form of *Frogger*'s fate should he meet the business end of a truck, the game didn't include any combat elements at all. Coupled with colourful visuals, the result was a game which had a broad appeal to players of all ages and persuasions, and *Frogger*'s long-term success is testament to that.

GRADIUS

SHOOT THE **CORE!**

ARCADE, VARIOUS, 1985

Konami has a strong roster of excellent shoot-'em-ups to its name, and the *Gradius* series is perhaps the most famous of them – even if it was originally known as *Nemesis* in non-Japanese arcades. The game features memorable levels with interesting features like erupting volcanoes and wrap-around vertical scrolling, and it's packed with classic visuals, too, from the distinctive boss fights to the iconic Moai heads.

The thing that really set *Gradius* apart from its competition was its innovative approach to power-ups, which allowed players to pick up items and exchange them for ship upgrades. These cost as little as one item for a speed boost, but the better ones cost more – the option drones, gun upgrades and such. The downside is that losing all of those hard-earned power-ups upon losing a life makes it really hard to carry on, but that difficulty directly caused the creation of the famous Konami Code to aid in the testing of the NES conversion, so we'll forgive it.

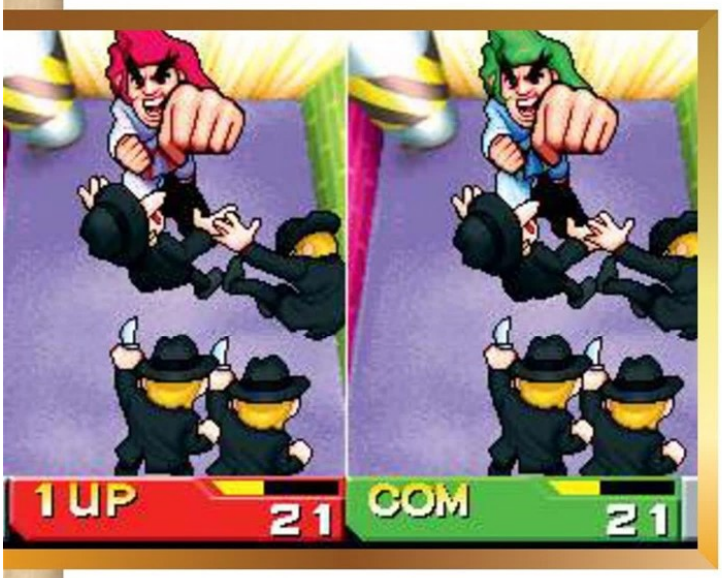
» [Arcade] This boss appears throughout the game and when he does make sure you 'shoot the core'!

PRO EVOLUTION SOCCER 6

THE BEAUTIFUL **GAME**

PS2, VARIOUS, 2006

Konami's football games have always been good fun, but when the *ISS* series transformed into *Pro Evolution Soccer* in the Noughties, it rose to become one of the two titans of the scene. The series has always prioritised tight mechanics and realism over flashy presentation and licensed teams, meaning that it has often been preferred by serious football fans. The gap between Konami's game and its competitors was widest at the end of the PS2 generation, after years of refinement.



BISHI BASHI SPECIAL

MAD **MASH**

PLAYSTATION, 2000

If you're a frequent host of multiplayer sessions, this minigame collection should definitely be one of the games you include in your regular rotation. *Bishi Bashi Special* is a compilation of *Super Bishi Bashi* and *Hyper Bishi Bashi*, containing 85 different button-bashing challenges ranging from kicking mobsters to chucking custard pies at your wedding guests. While only three controllers are supported at once during games, eight players can take part in party mode so everybody can get involved.

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES

HEROES IN A **HALF-SHELL**

ARCADE, VARIOUS, 1989

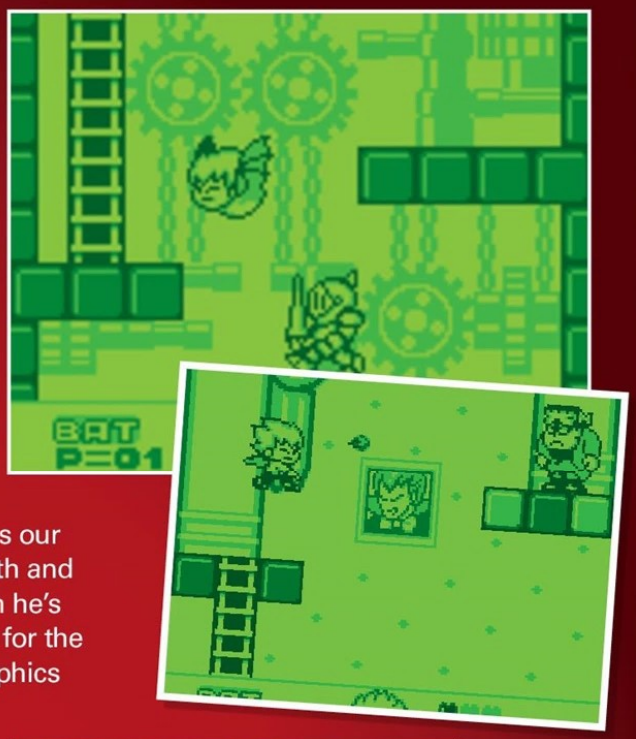
When you think about cartoon franchises that would make good scrolling beat-'em-ups, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*' martial arts action ensures that it stands out as an obvious option – and Konami's mastery of developing licensed games in that particular genre made it a game to remember. A four-player cabinet allowed a group of players to take the full gang of pizza-powered reptilian heroes into battle, as they fought through burning buildings and city streets to take down the evil Shredder and his henchmen.

KID DRACULA

WISE UP, **(BLOOD) SUCKER**

GAME BOY, 1993

Cutesy spin-offs of famous series seem to be big business in Japan, judging by the existence of games like *Virtua Fighter Kids* and *Splatterhouse: Wanpaku Graffiti*. Konami used its successful *Castlevania* series as the base for *Kid Dracula*, a platform game which sees our young vampiric hero fighting to fend off Galamoth and the monsters that have turned to his side, though he's forgotten most of his spells. The game is perfect for the handheld format of the Game Boy, with bold graphics and very solid game design.



ZONE OF THE ENDERS

MECH MY **DAY**

PS2, VARIOUS, 2001

Few early PlayStation 2 games could justify the wave of hype that preceded the console, but this was one of the first to show what the system could do in the right hands. Set in the vicinity of Jupiter, the game tasks players with controlling the mecha unit Jehuty, which must be returned to the Space Force following an attack from a hostile army. The game's combination of melee combat, shooting and spectacular visuals have aged well, even if its length is slightly short.

CASTLEVANIA III: DRACULA'S CURSE

HIGH **STAKES**

NES, 1989

Drac's back, and it's up to Trevor Belmont and his band of buddies to defeat the vampiric dark lord. *Castlevania III* is the best of the original NES trilogy as it refines the platform action of the series' first game, adding companion characters, a variety of routes and multiple endings to ensure that the game offers superb replay value. It doesn't hurt that *Castlevania III* looks great, too, and the music is excellent – particularly in the Japanese version, which benefits from extra sound channels.

CONTRA

EIGHTIES **MACHO ACTION**

ARCADE, VARIOUS, 1987

Inspired by the action movies of the Eighties (its lead soldiers, Bill and Lance, are clearly based on Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone) *Contra* works thanks to its fast-paced action, interesting selection of power-ups and varied mechanics. It also switches things up by having traditional scrolling stages and levels that utilise a perspective that has you travelling 'into the screen' and deeper into Red Falcon's bunkers. *Contra* remains one of Konami's most successful early franchises, so it's hardly surprising to see a new compilation dedicated to the series arriving later this year.

TRACK & FIELD

GOLD MEDAL

ARCADE, VARIOUS, 1983

While many preferred the multitiered events of *Hyper Sports*, it's worth highlighting what a big deal *Track & Field* was on release. Designed to tie-in with the 1984 Summer Olympics, this lets you compete in six button-mashing events: 100 Meter Dash, Javelin Throw, High Jump, Hammer Throw, 110 Meter Hurdles and Long Jump. It proved extremely popular for Konami, leading to numerous sequels over the years, with the most recent, *Hyper Sports R* appearing on Switch in 2018.

ALIENS

WAS THAT IN THE **MOVIE?**

ARCADE, 1990

While *Aliens* features many of the big moments from the film, including the rescue of Newt and a final face-off against an Xenomorph Queen, it also features a lot of made up nonsense, too. Not that we're complaining, as the new enemies and bosses that are introduced keep you on your toes, while sequences like the frantic APC chase prove that Konami excelled at making action games. What a pity, then, that this never received a home release.

AXELAY

MORE THAN **MODE 7**

SUPER NINTENDO, 1992

While everyone lost their marbles over *Axelay*'s sensational Mode 7 stages, it's worth remembering that its traditional side-on levels are just as sumptuous to look at and that it has a soundtrack that's every bit the match for its eye-scorching visuals. Mechanically it's on-point, too, with a generous selection of switchable weapons that need to be carefully managed if you want to survive each stage.

CASTLEVANIA: LORDS OF SHADOW

FANG-**TASTIC**

PLAYSTATION 3, VARIOUS, 2010

After several near misses during the Nintendo 64 and PS2 eras, MercurySteam and Kojima Productions finally nailed a 3D *Castlevania* game. *Lords Of Shadow* retains the exploration of earlier games in the series, but amps things up considerably from a combat perspective, playing more like a *God Of War* or *Ninja Gaiden* game. Its titans are straight out of *Shadow Of The Colossus*, while the high production values and solid voice cast are as slick as any other game of the time. A staggeringly good reboot.

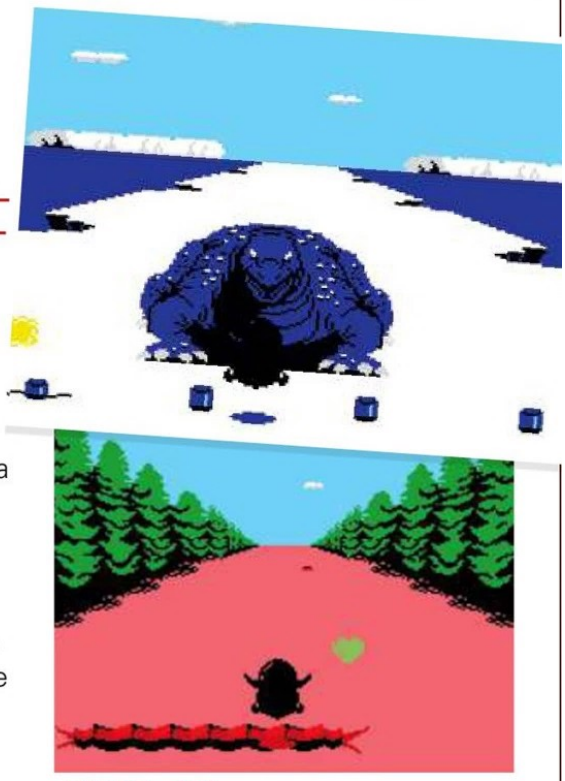
PENGUIN ADVENTURE

ANTARCTIC **ANTICS**

MSX, 1986

MSX gamers will undoubtedly have a soft spot for Konami as the company was a prolific developer of high-quality software for the 8-bit platform, and *Penguin Adventure* is emblematic of its output on the hardware. The game sees our plucky penguin protagonist Penta on a quest to retrieve the golden apple that will cure Penguette, the gravely-ill princess of the penguin kingdom. In order to get it, he has to journey through caverns, across icebergs, under the sea and even into outer space, in a series of pseudo-3D stages that rank amongst the most visually appealing scenes on the system.

As well as running along and avoiding obstacles, Penta has plenty to do – he can trade the fish he's collected for items, and must battle bosses every so often. There are also plenty of secret routes and items to discover. Don't forget to pay attention to when you take a break while playing, too. It's important, since you can only see the good ending if you pause the game once!



» [MSX] Before Solid Snake, Hideo Kojima helped create Penta.

» [MSX2] You'd have to spend a lot of money if you want to own *Space Manbow* today.

SPACE MANBOW

DANCE THE **MANBOW**

MSX2, 1989

This oddly named game is a Japanese exclusive, and one which is much like any other horizontal shoot-'em-up you've played, including those in Konami's own *Gradius* series. It does differ ever so slightly, though: as you need to keep picking up power-ups due to the decaying power of your main weapon, but just about everything else from the lasers to the options can be found elsewhere.

But sometimes a game doesn't need to be particularly innovative – it just needs to have a clear aim that is executed well. *Space Manbow* does exactly that, providing a shooter of high quality. The level designs are both attractive and interesting, huge bosses are delivered as you'd hope, and the soundtrack is one of the more memorable ones to have emanated from the MSX2's YM2149 chip. That explains why the game fetches so much money on the second-hand market – even loose copies have changed hands on auction sites for over £100.

METAL GEAR

INFILTRATE AND **DESTROY**

MSX2, VARIOUS, 1987

Although many players didn't experience the *Metal Gear* series for the first time until it hit the PlayStation, that's no reflection on the quality of the early games – they've been very good from the beginning. The original *Metal Gear* includes many of the key elements that the series would become known for – the emphasis on stealth, the importance of picking up your equipment over the course of the mission, and even the use of cardboard boxes to hide in.

The original *Metal Gear* is very relevant in plot terms, too. This game concerns Solid Snake's solo mission to Outer Heaven, where the bipedal nuclear-equipped tank Metal Gear is being built. Important characters that would play a major role in later games are introduced for the first time, too, including the likes of Big Boss and Gray Fox.

» [MSX2] *Metal Gear's* final boss is famously retconned in *Metal Gear Solid V*.

YIE AR KUNG-FU

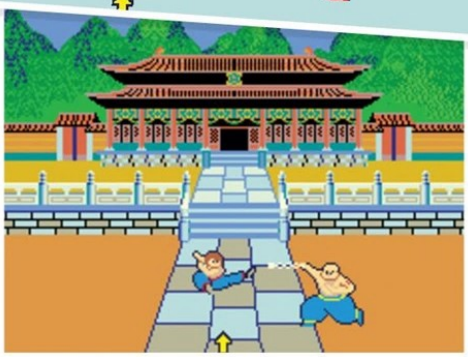
FISTS AND FEET **OF FURY**

ARCADE, VARIOUS, 1985

Konami's brawler might not have been the first fighting game to arrive on the scene, but it did establish many of the elements that would go on to define the genre. It's ironic, then, that the company was never able to capitalise on that success when Capcom and SNK were facing off during the Eighties and Nineties.

Fortunately, Konami managed to get everything right with *Yie Ar Kung-Fu* and even today it remains an entertaining fighter thanks to its challenging opponents, diverse range of moves (which include flying kicks and groin punches) and a slick control system. *Yie Ar Kung-Fu*'s large range of opponents are all typically equipped with weapons, meaning you'll need to use a variety of strategies in order to best them.

Yie Ar Kung-Fu's success saw it ported to numerous systems at the time, meaning that even if you'd never experienced the satisfaction of besting Blues in the arcade, you were certainly able to experience it in the comfort of your own home.



» [Arcade] Check out RG194 for more info on *Yie Ar Kung Fu*.

» [Arcade] There's a bit of *Asteroids'* DNA in *Time Pilot*, but Konami's classic ramps up the action.

TIME PILOT

TIME **FLIES**

ARCADE, VARIOUS ,1982

Before Yoshiki Okamoto struck gold at Capcom with the likes of *Final Fight* and *Street Fighter II*, he was making waves at Konami with a range of interesting shoot-'em-ups, including this excellent effort. *Time Pilot* set itself apart from other shooters of the time thanks to its unique premise, which saw the action take place across time zones, instead of the usual space age backdrops that were so popular in the late Seventies and early Eighties. Your plucky pilot has to rescue his parachuting buddies while battling through five distinct eras: 1910, 1940, 1970, 1982 and a very optimistic take on 2001. Each time zone has its own unique flying craft to obliterate, so you'll be facing off against biplanes and blimps in 1910 and blisteringly fast UFOs in 2001 (we told you it was optimistic). Enemy patterns and ship movements become more intense with each time skip, too, with everything becoming harder still upon a full loop. While a sequel, *Time Pilot '84*, followed in 1984, Konami's original effort remains our favourite.

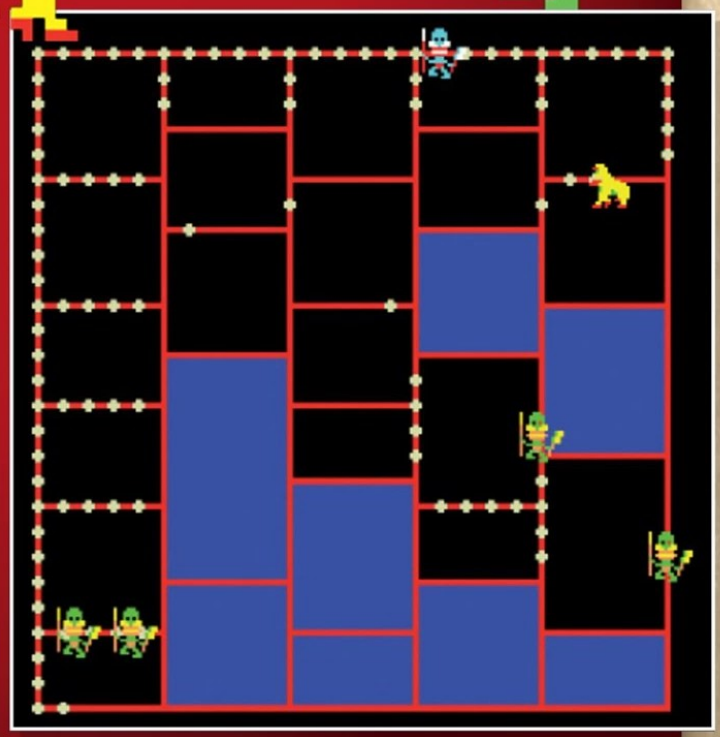
AMIDAR

A-**MAZE-ING**

ARCADE, VARIOUS, 1981

The quickest of glances at *Amidar* will suggest that it's a shameless *Pac-Man* clone. As it stands, it actually borrows ideas not only from Namco's game, but also a Japanese lottery system called Amidakuji and the end result is a fun variation of the popular maze game.

Like *Pac-Man* you're stuck in a maze and surrounded by enemies (headhunters in this case) but there are several differences that make *Amidar* stand apart from its more famous peer. The most notable is a 'jump' button, which sends all enemies up into the air, allowing you to dash under them, but you must also fill in square and rectangular areas of the maze by collecting all the dots that surround them. It's all finished off with the bonus round, which sees you trying to feed a pig by dropping food down pipes. Now *that* wasn't in Namco's game.



» [PlayStation] *Symphony Of The Night* ushered in a new era of explorative RPG-like *Castlevania* games.

CASTLEVANIA: SYMPHONY OF THE NIGHT

DRACULA **REBORN**

PLAYSTATION, 1997

Even though *Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night* was planned as a direct sequel to the PC Engine exclusive, *Castlevania: Rondo Of Blood,* Konami also intended it to be a fresh start for the popular franchise. Koji 'Iga' Igarashi's game achieved just that, wisely embracing 2D when other developers were experimenting with the third dimension, and creating a whole new subgenre (don't make us say it) in the process.

Even today, it's easy to see what makes *Symphony Of The Night* so special. The gigantic castle you explore can be tackled in numerous ways (providing you have the required abilities to reach certain areas, of course) and offers a real sense of progression as you explore the cavernous innards of Dracula's home. Carefully placed save points ensure that retrying boss fights rarely becomes a frustrating experience, while the increasingly powerful weapons and abilities you pick up further adds to the game's overall enjoyment.

The 2D visuals, which incorporate some cool 3D elements, hold up tremendously well, while they're matched by an equally evocative soundtrack that ranks as one of the best in the series. Low sales in the UK have led to PAL copies now selling for extortionate amounts online (especially if they include the CD soundtrack) meaning it's become the jewel of many owners' collections. It's fortunate, then, that this Gothic classic has been resurrected numerous times over the past two decades.

AT WHAT COST?

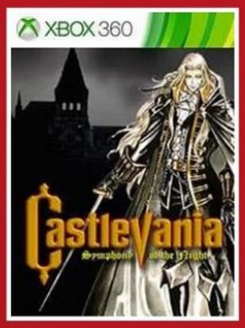
You don't need deep pockets to own Konami's masterpiece

US PLAYSTATION £45+

■ *SOTN* was far more successful in the US, turning up on the Greatest Hits label. While it lacks the CD soundtrack found with the PAL release, it's far better optimised. The original US release of the game typically sells for double the price of the Greatest Hits version. Both are still cheaper than the PAL release, however.

SATURN £110+

■ This is rising in price and could eventually dethrone the popular PAL version. It's a mixed bag, because while it allows you to play as Maria Renard and includes new areas of the castle, it also suffers graphically compared to the PlayStation original and has horrible slowdown at times. It's one for the collectors, we feel.



XBOX 360 £20 (disc) £6.75 (digital)

■ Microsoft earned plenty of Kudos when it announced *Symphony Of The Night* was heading to Xbox Live Arcade. It's an excellent port of the game and is optimised for HDTVs thanks to solid work by Backbone Entertainment. While it exists in physical form in the US, the easiest way to get it is directly from Xbox Live.

PSP £30 (disc) £7.99 (digital)

■ When Konami released *Castlevania: The Dracula X Chronicles* for Sony's handheld it included ports of both *Rondo Of Blood* and *Symphony Of The Night*. *SOTN* requires a little bit of work to unlock, but it's worth doing as it's a revised version that features items dropped from the original and a more accurate localisation.

PS4 £15.99 (digital)

■ *Castlevania Requiem* on the PS4 features both *SOTN* and *Rondo Of Blood*. It's effectively the same version of the game that appeared on the PSP but it's obviously been updated to run effectively on modern day televisions.

» [Arcade] It might not look like much in a screenshot, but playing *Beatmania IIDX* is a thrilling experience.

BEATMANIA IIDX

BASSDROP **FREAKS**

ARCADE, PS2, 1999

***Beatmania* was the game that kicked off Konami's dominance of the arcade music game scene, but it was the sequel that has proven to be perhaps the developer's greatest work.** The game's cabinet features a massive sound system, and requires players to use a turntable and seven keys (two more than in the original *Beatmania*) to hit notes in time with the music. While it isn't much to look at visually, the game is known for its impressive song lists and ferocious challenge.

Beatmania IIDX outlasted not only most of its competitors, but even its own sequel *Beatmania III*, which was discontinued after five versions in 2002. Since then the game has developed into an ongoing series in its own right – 14 PS2 versions were released from 2000 to 2009. The most recent arcade instalment, Beatmania *IIDX 26 Rootage*, was released in November 2018 but you shouldn't expect to find it outside of Japan.

DANCING STAGE EUROMIX

"SHOW ME YOUR **HOTTEST MOVES!"**

ARCADE, PLAYSTATION, 2000

» [Arcade] Konami's superb dancing series is still a mainstay in arcades today.

The *Dancing Stage* series (or *Dance Dance Revolution* outside of Europe up until recently) is a rhythm action titan, and it's not hard to see why – there was nothing else like it in the late Nineties, and it was easy to figure out exactly what you needed to do just by looking at it. For many players in the UK, this was the version that served as an introduction to the series, and its popularity spawned a legion of imitators including the likes of *Dance:UK* and *The Jungle Book: Groove Party*.

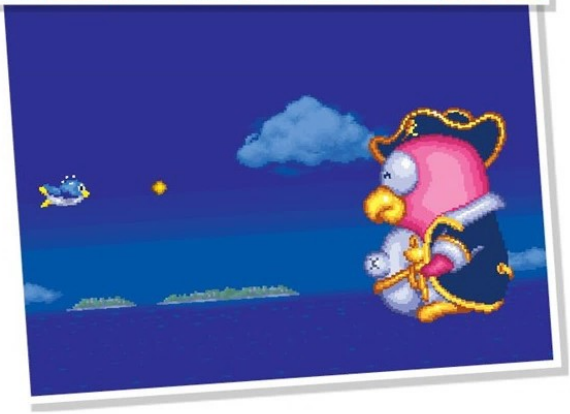
The soundtrack was the secret to the success of *Dancing Stage EuroMix*, as it featured a strong mix of Konami originals and licensed tracks. Casual players were drawn in by the likes of Boyzone, Chumbawamba and The Buggles, while the more heavily invested crowd appreciated *Dancemania* tracks like Captain Jack and *Dance Dance Revolution* staples such as Afronova. And that's what ultimately gives the game its staying power – nearly two decades on, it's not hard to find a machine still in active service in UK arcades.

PARODIUS

WAR OF **THE WEIRD**

ARCADE, VARIOUS, 1990

This comedy spin-off of the *Gradius* series is one of the best known cute-'em-ups out there, and it might even be better than the source material. As well as some excellent colourful graphics and bizarre enemies like cat-headed pirate airships and bosses like the one we've shown here, the game allows you to choose from four characters – each of which offers a unique set of power-ups based on various entries in the main *Gradius* series.



GRADIUS V

THE BACTERIANS ARE **BACK**

PS2, 2004

In an interesting twist, the last numbered entry in the *Gradius* series has the distinction of being developed by a team of ex-Konami staff. Treasure took on development duties for this game, and chose not to fix what wasn't broken – new features are mostly limited to greater control over your Option drones. But it plays brilliantly as you'd expect from the developers of *Radiant Silvergun* and *Ikaruga*, and thanks to an assist from *Border Down* developer G.rev it looks great too.

THE GOONIES

HEY, YOU **GUYS!**

FAMICOM, VARIOUS 1986

There's a lot of oddness about this game – it's based on one of the most beloved cult movies of the Eighties, one that has strong resonance with American audiences, yet it was never given a proper US NES release. Instead it was confined to PlayChoice-10 and Nintendo VS System cabinets. That's a shame because although it's simplistic, *The Goonies* is a good arcade platformer which handles brilliantly and offers a real challenge. It's well worth importing, though.

SUIKODEN

A WORLD OF **WARRIORS**

PLAYSTATION, VARIOUS, 1995

***Suikoden* was one of the first JRPGs to really make an impact on the PlayStation, kicking off a series on a system that would host many of the genre's classics.** The game tasks your hero with leading a revolt against a corrupt state by finding and recruiting 108 warriors from rebel factions. The cast and plot are backed by exciting battles that mix 2D sprites with 3D backdrops, as well as a brilliant soundtrack.

GREEN BERET

RED **TERROR**

ARCADE, VARIOUS, 1985

Back in 1985, few arcade run-and-guns could compare with *Green Beret* – or *Rush'n Attack* if you're American (or *Green Bert*, if you're a *Your Sinclair fanatic*). The game massively improved on the side-scrolling combat template of games like *Kung-Fu Master* by adding platforms and ladders, as well as weapon pick-ups that allowed you to toast enemies with a flamethrower or blow them to bits with grenades. It was a perfect slice of Cold War entertainment, and converted well to many home platforms.

» [PC] There are some unsettlingly weird enemies to battle in *Silent Hill 2* and James isn't much of a fighter.

SILENT HILL 2

A MASTERFULLY **MACABRE SEQUEL**

PLAYSTATION 2, VARIOUS, 2001

Few videogames are as emotionally draining to play as Konami's exceptional horror sequel. From the moment you walk along the mist-filled path that leads to the town of Silent Hill you're immediately on edge and that tension rarely lets up as the game continues. Indeed, there is an uneasiness and oppressiveness to Konami's game that was incredibly unusual at the time and – *Shattered Memories* aside – no other game in the series has matched it. The likes of *Resident Evil* relied on hammy jump scares and waves of zombies to wear down your resolve, but Konami damaged you psychologically, scarring you for life with endless unsettling revelations which hinted at numerous taboo subjects that rarely entered the medium of mainstream videogames. Get the later *Director's Cut* as it's the definitive experience.

SILENT HILL: SHATTERED MEMORIES

SCARIER THAN WII **SHOVELWARE**

WII, VARIOUS, 2009

When Team Silent scattered to the four winds, numerous developers were allowed to take a stab at Konami's revered series. After impressing Konami with *Silent Hill: Origins*, Climax Studios found itself in charge of *Shattered Memories*, a loose remake of the original *Silent Hill*. The team did not disappoint. Everything about Climax's game works exceptionally well, from Sam Barlow's meticulous script, to the clever and inventive use of the Wii's controller and the nightmarish runs through the game's alternate dimension. PS2, PS3 and PSP versions also exist, but the original remains the best.

» [Wii] *Shattered Memories* is a clever retelling of the original *Silent Hill*, you play as Harry Mason trying to find his missing daughter.

KEY CHARACTERS

Who's who in Silent Hill 2

JAMES SUNDERLAND

■ James is the protagonist of *Silent Hill 2* and visits the town after receiving a letter from his wife Mary, which sounds perfectly normal until you realise she's been dead for three years. You soon learn that, like Silent Hill itself, there are two very different sides to his character.

MARIA

■ This character comes into contact with James throughout his stay in Silent Hill. She looks identical to James' dead wife, although she wears very different clothes and has a different personality. She becomes a playable character in the scenario, Born From A Wish, which debuted on Xbox.

PYRAMID HEAD

■ Masahiro Ito's nightmarish creation remains the most iconic monster in the series and is also a firm favourite in the spin-off films. They are huge brutish figures, heavily muscled and are often seen wielding a great knife or spear. The Pyramid Heads featured in *Silent Hill 2* are a manifestation of James Sunderland's guilt.

GYRUSS

ONE MORE **WARP**

ARCADE, VARIOUS 1983

Yoshiki Okamoto's second shoot-'em-up for Konami plays like a cross between *Tempest* and *Galaxian,* and is just as frantic as you'd expect. Fuelled by an upbeat electronic version of JS Bach's *Toccata And Fugue In D Minor,* enemies zoom in and out of the screen at alarming speeds and you have to take them down as quickly as possible. It gets incredibly hectic the further you warp towards Earth and things get even trickier once you have to contend with incoming asteroids that can't be destroyed.

ROCKET KNIGHT ADVENTURES

SPARKS WILL **FLY**

MEGA DRIVE, 1993

While it took a while for Konami to embrace the Mega Drive, owners of Sega's 16-bit machine certainly didn't miss out. *Rocket Knight Adventures* is a crazy offering from Nobuya Nakazato (*Contra III, Contra: Hard Corps*) that features blisteringly fast-paced action sequences, shoot-'em-up sections and the chance to battle pigs in a gigantic mech suit. It's not the easiest of games, but the sheer wackiness of Nakazato's classic constantly compels you forward, if only to witness what comes next.

TWINBEE

CUTE BUT **DEADLY**

ARCADE, VARIOUS, 1985

***TwinBee* makes a spot here because it's not only a great little shooter, but also one of the earliest examples of a cute-'em-up.** Its design is quite similar to *Xevious*, but the similarities end there as Konami's game swaps out that game's dour space themes for overt cuteness. The pastel backdrops are a world away from typical Eighties shmups; your anthropomorphic craft comes equipped with tiny little arms, while power-ups are hidden inside colourful bells. Such was the popularity of *TwinBee*, it spawned an entire franchise.

METAL GEAR SOLID: PEACE WALKER

THE PSP'S OWN **BIG BOSS**

PSP, VARIOUS, 2010

As great as *MGSV* is, Kojami's final Konami game wouldn't exist without this. The PSP often delivered home console experiences in the palm of your hand, but it really pushed the boat out with *Peace Walker*. In addition to making missions into snack-sized scenarios, *Peace Walker* also introduces the excellent Mother Base system, which improves on the army management mode first seen in *Portable Ops*. It's every bit as unique as the *Acid* series and one of the series' high points.

CONTRA: HARD CORPS

MEGA **MACHO** TIME

MEGA DRIVE, 1994

If you were lucky enough to own both a Mega Drive and SNES during the Nineties, you were treated to an excellent one-two punch of *Contra* action. Graphically, the Mega Drive's *Hard Corps* is stupendously good, delivering all manner of crazy effects that you wouldn't typically associate with the machine. It delivers with its gameplay too, thanks to multiple routes, four very different characters to play as, a useful power slide and immensely satisfying boss encounters.

THE LEGEND OF THE MYSTICAL NINJA

FULL OF **EASTERN PROMISE**

SUPER NINTENDO, 1991

Even today *Mystical Ninja* remains an entertaining arcade-style romp, and is deliciously silly in places thanks to its delightful aesthetics, charming cutscenes and kooky bosses. It cleverly mixes elements from various genres, impresses with some clever level design on its later stages and even manages to recreate the first level of *Gradius* for good measure.

METAL GEAR ACID 2

KONAMI'S **TRUMP CARD**

PSP, 2005

While the first *Metal Gear Acid* is an intriguing card game, it has many annoying niggles that make it irksome to play. Konami ironed all these issues out for the sequel, making it an essential addition to any PSP collection. The new cel-shaded visuals offer *Acid*'s sequel a distinctive, stylish look, while everything from navigation to card management is far more streamlined than before. Additional missions add to the game's overall longevity and there's even an option to play in stereoscopic 3D thanks to the included Solid Eye viewing device.

BOKTAI: THE SUN IS IN YOUR HAND

KOJIMA LIGHTS UP THE **GBA**

GAME BOY ADVANCE, 2003

While no *Metal Gear* game graced the GBA, Nintendo's handheld was still blessed by Hideo Kojima's presence. Using a cartridge, which harnessed the sun's rays by way of a photometric light sensor, *Boktai* actively encouraged you to play outside so you could keep your gun's charge high. It was popular enough to spawn three sequels, two for the GBA and a third for the Nintendo DS.

CONTRA III: THE ALIEN WARS

AN EXPLOSIVE **CLASSIC**

SNES, 1992

Konami's first 16-bit *Contra* for consoles was a revelation. While the top-down Mode 7 stages are beginning to show their age, it was hard to not be wowed by them in 1992. It's an excellent example of the run-and-gun genre, and the best game in the series (depending on whether you speak to a SNES or Mega Drive fan). The graphics are excellent, with brilliantly detailed sprites and enormous bosses, while the awesome soundtrack easily matches the insane action.

VANDAL HEARTS

BLOOD BATH

PLAYSTATION, VARIOUS, 1996

While a lot has been made of *Vandal Hearts'* gory deaths, to focus on them and them alone would do the game a disservice. It's an exceptionally accomplished strategy game with balanced mechanics and a solid selection of character classes to master that range from archers and monks to mages and clerics. While the story is perhaps a little weak, *Vandal Hearts'* brilliantly balanced combat mechanics ensure every battle is a satisfying challenge.

SUPER CASTLEVANIA IV

ALL KILLER, **NO FILLER**

SUPER NINTENDO, 1991

Ignore the garish graphics of its early stages, as *Castlevania IV* blossoms into a macabre masterpiece once it gets going. Seen on release as a graphical tour de force thanks to its extensive use of Mode 7, Masahiro Ueno's game remains a dark delight thanks to its satisfying level design, useful new moves for Simon Belmont, a series of exhilarating boss encounters and one of the best soundtracks to ever appear in a videogame.

retro GAMER

THE MINI KONAMI COMPANION

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